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A COMEDY OF MASKS

A NOVEL

BY
ERNEST DOWSON
AND
ARTHUR MOORE

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. II.



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A COMEDY OF MASKS

CHAPTER XV.

A DAY or two later, when Rainham called in the afternoon at the Kensington studio to announce his approaching flight from England, he found Mrs. Sylvester and Eve in occupation, and a sitting in progress. His greeting of Eve was somewhat constrained. He seemed to stumble over the congratulations, the utterance of which usage and old acquaintance demanded; and he was more at his ease when the ice was fairly broken.

‘I expected to find you here,’ he said, addressing Mrs. Sylvester. ‘I have been

to your house, and they told me you would probably be at the studio—*the* studio—so I came on.'

'Good boy, good boy!' said Lightmark, with as much approbation in his voice as the presence of the stick of a paint-brush between his teeth would allow. 'You'll excuse our going on a little longer, won't you? It'll be too dark in a few minutes.'

'You don't look well, Philip,' remarked Mrs. Sylvester presently, with a well-assumed air of solicitude. 'You ought to have come to Lucerne with us, instead of spending all the summer in town.'

'Yes; why *didn't* you, Philip?' cried Eve reproachfully. 'It would have been so nice—oh, I'm so sorry, Dick, I didn't mean to move—you really ought to have come.'

'Well, there was the dock, you see, and business and all that sort of thing. I can't always neglect business, you know.'

Lightmark asserted emphatically that he *didn't* know, while, on the other hand,

Mrs. Sylvester was understood to remark, with a certain air of mystery, that she could quite understand what kept Philip in town.

‘Don’t you think I might have been rather—rather a fifth wheel?’ suggested Rainham feebly, entirely ignoring Mrs. Sylvester’s remark, to which, indeed, he attached no special meaning.

‘Spare our blushes, old man,’ expostulated Dick. ‘It would have been awfully jolly. You would have been such a companion for Charles, you know,’ he added, with a malicious glance over his shoulder. ‘Oh dear! fog again. I think I must release you now, Eve. Tell me what you think of the portrait, now that I’ve worked in the background, Philip. Mrs. Sylvester, now don’t you think I was right about the flowers?’

There was, in fact, a charming, almost virginal delicacy and freshness of air and tone about the picture. The girl’s simple white dress, with only—the painter had so

far prevailed over the milliner—only a suggestion of bright ribands at throat and waist; the quaint Chippendale chair, the sombre Spanish leather screen, which formed the background, and the pot of copper-coloured chrysanthemums, counterparts of the little cluster which Eve wore in the bosom of her gown, on a many-cornered Turkish table at the side: it had all the gay realism of modern Paris without losing the poetry of the old school, or attaining the hardness of the new.

Rainham looked at it attentively, closely, for a long time. Then he said simply:

‘It’s the best thing you have done, Dick. It will be one of the best portraits in the Academy, and you ought to get a good place on the line.’

‘I’m so glad!’ cried Eve rapturously, clasping her hands. ‘On the line! But,’ and her voice fell, ‘it isn’t to go to the Academy. Mamma has promised Sir—— Dick is going to send it to the Grosvenor. But it’s pretty much the same, isn’t it?’

Oh, now show Philip the sketch you have made for your Academy picture,' she added, pointing to a board which stood on another easel, with a protecting veil over the paper which was stretched upon it. 'You know *he* can tell us if it's like the real thing.'

'If it's the Riviera, or—or dry docks,' added Rainham modestly.

But Lightmark stepped forward hastily, after a moment's hesitation, and put his hand on the drawing just as Eve was preparing with due ceremony to unveil it.

'Excuse me, I don't want to show it to Rainham yet. I—I want to astonish him, you know.'

He laughed rather uneasily, and Eve gave way, with some surprise in her eyes, and a puzzled cloud on her pretty brow, and went and seated herself on the settee at her mother's side.

'He's afraid of my critical eye, Mrs. Sylvester,' said Rainham gravely. 'That's

what it is. Well, if you don't show it me now, you won't have another opportunity yet awhile.'

'That's it, Eve,' explained Lightmark hastily. 'I'm afraid of his critical what's-his-name. You know he can be awfully severe sometimes, the old beggar, and I don't want him to curl me up and annihilate me while you're here.'

'I don't believe he would, if it were *ever* so bad,' said Eve, only half satisfied. 'And it isn't; it's awfully good. But it's too dark to see anything now.'

'By Jove, so it is! Mrs. Sylvester, I'm awfully sorry; I always like the twilight myself. Rainham, would you mind ringing the bell? Thanks. Oh, don't apologize; the handle always comes off. I never use it myself, except when I have visitors. I go and shout in the passage; but Mrs. Grumbit objects to being shouted for when there are visitors on the premises. Great hand at etiquette, Mrs. Grumbit is.'

The lady in question arrived at this juncture, fortified by a new and imposing cap, and laden with candles and a tea-tray, which she deposited, with much clatter of teaspoons, on a table by Mrs. Sylvester's side.

'Thank you, Mrs. Grumbit. And now will you come to a poor bachelor's assistance, and pour out tea, Mrs. Sylvester? And I'm very sorry, but I haven't got any sugar-tongs. I generally borrow Copal's, but the beggar's gone out and locked his door. You ladies will have to imagine you're at Oxford.'

Mrs. Sylvester looked bewildered, and paused with one hand on the Satsuma teapot.

'Don't you know, mamma, it isn't—form, don't you say? to have sugar-tongs at Oxford? It was one of the things Charles always objected to. I believe he tried to introduce them, but people always threw them out of the window. *I* think they're an absurd invention.'

Rainham, as he watched her slender fingers with their dimpled knuckles daintily selecting the most eligible lumps out of the cracked blue-and-white china teacup which did service for a sugar-basin, unhesitatingly agreed with her ; though Mrs. Sylvester seemed to think her argument, that sugar-tongs could be so pretty—‘Queen Anne, you know’—entirely unanswerable.

It was not until Mrs. Grumbit broke in upon the cosy little party to announce that the ladies’ carriage was at the door that Rainham remembered the real object of his expedition.

Then, when Eve, warmly wrapped in her furs, and with the glow of the firelight still in her face, held out a small gloved hand with a smiling ‘Au revoir, Philip,’ he shook his head rather sadly.

‘I’m afraid it must be good-bye—for some time, at least. I came to tell you that I am on the wing again. Doctor’s

orders, you know. I shall be in Bordighera on Friday, I expect.'

'And to-day's Tuesday,' complained Eve.

'And I was just going to ask you to dine with us, one day soon,' expostulated her mother.

'You must come over at Christmas, old man,' said Dick cheerfully. 'For the wedding, you know. You've got to give me away, and be bridesmaid, and all that sort of thing.'

Rainham shook his head again.

'I'm afraid not. You don't know my doctor. He wouldn't hear of it. No, you won't see me in town again before May, unless there's a radical reform in the climate.'

'Couldn't—couldn't we put it off till May?' suggested Eve naïvely.

But the suggestion was not received with anything approaching enthusiasm.

'Good-bye, Philip,' said Eve again, when her lover was handing Mrs. Syl-

vester into the little brougham. 'Mind you take great care of yourself.'

Rainham returned the frank pressure of her hand.

'Good-bye,' he said.

CHAPTER XVI.

AFTER all, Philip Rainham loitered on his way South. He spent a week in Paris, and passing on by way of Mont Cenis, lingered in Turin, a city with a treacherous climate and ugly rectangular streets, which he detested, out of sheer idleness, for three days. On the fourth, waking to find winter upon him suddenly, and the ground already dazzling from a night's snow, he was seized with panic—an ancient horror of falling ill in strange places—~~returning to him with fresh force,~~ as he felt already the chill of the bleak plains of Piedmont in his bones. It sent him hurrying to his destination, Bordighera, by the first train; and it was not too soon: the misused lung

asserted itself in a hemorrhage, and by the time he reached the fair little town running out so coquettishly, amid its olive-yards and palm-trees, into the blue Mediterranean, he was in no proper temper to soliloquize on its charms.

The doctor had a willing slave in him for three weeks; then he revolted, and found himself sufficiently cured to sit when the sun shone—and sometimes when it did not—covered in a gray shawl, smoking innumerable cigarettes, on a green blistered seat in the garden of his hotel. He replied to the remonstrating that he had been ill before this bout, and would surely be ill again, but that temporarily he was a well man. It was only when he was alone that he could afford to admit how savage a reminder of his disabilities he had received. And, indeed, his days of captivity had left their mark on him—the increased gauntness of his figure apart—in a certain irritation and nerve distress, which inclined him for once to

regret the multitude of acquaintance that his long habit of sojourning there had obtained. The clatter of English tongues at *table d'hôte* began to weary him; the heated controversy which waged over the gambling-tables of the little principality across the bay left him arid and tired; and the gossip of the place struck him as even more tedious and unprofitable than of old. He could no longer feign a decent interest in the flirtations of the three Miss Smiths, as they were recounted to him nightly by Mrs. Engel, the sympathetic widow who sat next to him, and whose sympathy he began, in the enlightenment of his indisposition, to distrust.

The relief with which he hailed the arrival of the post and a budget of letters from England surprised himself. It struck him that there was something feverish and strange in this waiting for news. Even to himself he did not dare to define his interest, confessing how greatly he cared.

Lightmark's epistles just then were fre-

quent and brief. The marriage was definitely fixed; the Colonel, his uncle, had been liberal beyond his hopes: a house in Grove Road of some splendour had been taken for the young couple, who were to install themselves there when the honeymoon, involving a sojourn in Paris and a descent into Italy, was done. Hints of a visit to Rainham followed, which at first he ignored; repeated in subsequent epistles with a greater directness, the prospect filled him with a pleasure so strangely mixed with pain that his pride took alarm. He thought it necessary to disparage the scheme in a letter to Lightmark, of a coldness which disgusted himself. Remorse seized him when it had been despatched, and he cherished a hope that it might fail of its aim. This, however, seemed improbable, when a fortnight had elapsed and it had elicited no reply. From Lady Garnett, at the tail of one of those long, witty, railing letters in which the old lady excelled, he heard that the

marriage was an accomplished fact, and the birds had flown. Mrs. Lightmark! the phrase tripped easily from his tongue when he mentioned it at dinner to his neighbour, Mrs. Engel, to whom the persons were known. Later, in his own room, face to face with the facts which it signified, he had an intolerable hour. He had extinguished his candle, and sat, partially undressed, in a mood of singular blankness by the fire of gnarled olive logs, which had smouldered down into one dull, red mass; and Eve's face was imaged there to his sick fancy as he had seen it last in Dick's studio in the vague light of an October evening, and yet with a certain new shadow, half sad and half reproachful, in the beautiful eyes. After all, had he done his best for the child? Now that this thing was irrevocable and complete, a host of old misgivings and doubts, which he had believed long ago banished, broke in upon him. He had only asked that she should be happy—at least, he said, it had

never been a question of himself. He certainly knew nothing to Lightmark's discredit, nothing which could have justified him in interfering, even if interference could have prevailed. The two had fallen in love with one another, and, the man not being visibly bad, the marriage had come about ; was there more to say ? And yet Rainham's ill - defined uneasiness still questioned and explored. A hundred little episodes in his friendship with the brilliant young painter, dismissed as of no import at the time, returned to him—instances, as it seemed now to his morbid imagination, in which that character, so frank and so enigmatic, rang scarcely true. And suddenly the tragical story of Kitty Crichton intruded itself before him, with all its shameful possibilities. Could Lightmark have lied to him ? Had not his sudden acquiescence in the painter's rendering of the thing implied a lack of courage—been one of those undue indolences, to which he was so prone, rather than any real testi-

mony of his esteem? Would not a more rigorous inquiry, a little patient investigation into so curious a coincidence, have been the more seemly part, as much for his friend's sake as for Eve's, so that this haunting, intolerable doubt might have been for ever put away — as surely it would have been? The contrary issue was too horrible for supposition. And he ended by mocking at himself with a half-sigh for carrying fastidiousness so far, recognising the mundane fitness of the match, and that heroic lovers, such as his tenderness for the damsel would have had, are, after all, rare, perhaps hardly existing out of visions in a somewhat gross world, where the finest ore is not without its considerable alloy.

Two days later, as he sat upon his wonted seat, in lazy enjoyment of the mid-day sun, a *vetturino*, heralded far down the road by the jingle of his horse's bells, deposited a couple at the door whose faces were familiar. At *table d'hôte*, though he

was separated from the new-comers by half a dozen covers, he had leisure to identify them as the Dollonds; and by-and-by the roving, impartial gaze of the Academician's wife encountering him, he could assure himself that the recognition was mutual. They came together at the end of *déjeuner*, and presently, at Mrs. Dollond's instigation, started for a stroll through the olives towards the old town.

'Are you wintering here?' he asked after a moment, feeling that an affirmative answer would hardly be to his taste.

But Mrs. Dollond, with an upward inclination of her vivacious shoulders, repudiated the notion. A whim of her own, she explained to Rainham confidentially, as they came abreast in the narrowing path, while Mr. Dollond strolled a little behind, cutting down vagrant weeds absently with his heavy oak stick.

'Hugh wanted a month's holiday; and I wanted'—she dropped her voice, glancing over her shoulder with an air of mock

mystery--‘yes, Mr. Rainham, you must not be shocked, but I wanted a fortnight at Monte Carlo; and so I may as well tell you that our destination is there. We came from San Remo this morning, meaning to drive over right away; but this place was so pretty that Hugh insisted on staying.’

Rainham helped her up a difficult terrace, and remarked urbanely that he was in fortune’s way.

She threw him a brilliant smile.

‘Ah, Mr. Rainham, if we had only known that you were here! then we might have arranged differently; we could have stayed here pastorally, and driven up to that delightful little place on the hill. Tell me, how is it called?’

She pointed with her scarlet parasol—they had emerged now on to the main road—at a little turreted town perched far above them on the brow of an olive-crested hill.

‘It is Sasso,’ said Rainham. ‘I should

have been delighted to come with you, but I am afraid it is out of the reach of carriages, and of invalids. You might go there on a mule.'

'Oh no!' she laughed; 'I think on the whole we shall be more comfortable at the Hôtel de Paris. Can't we induce you to come with us now?'

Rainham lifted his eyebrows, smiling a little and groping vaguely for an excuse, while Mrs. Dollond turned to her husband with a look which demanded corroboration of her speech.

'Yes, Mr. Rainham, do come, if you possibly can,' supplemented Mr. Dollond, coming forward in burlesque obedience. 'We are boring each other horribly—I can answer for myself—and it would be an act of real charity.'

'Well, Hugh, I am ashamed of you! You really ought not to say such things. If you can't behave better than that, you may go on maltreating those thistles. I declare we have left a regular trail of heads

in our wake, like the Revolution or Judge Jeffreys.'

'Bloody Jeffreys!' suggested Mr. Dollond mildly.

His wife turned to Rainham with the little despairing gesture which she reckoned one of her most effective mannerisms.

'Is not he dreadful? But you *will* come, Mr. Rainham? I am sure you know all about systems, and—and things. You know I insist on winning; so I must have a system, mustn't I?'

'Ah, Mrs. Dollond,' said her companion humorously, 'you remind me that the only system I have is a very bad one. I am afraid my doctor would not trust me with it at Monaco.'

'Oh!' said Mrs. Dollond reflectively, 'but you need not gamble, you know! You can help me, and see that I don't get cheated. Hugh and I will see your doctor, and promise to take care of you. Hugh shall carry your shawl—he likes carrying shawls.'

‘He is getting used to it,’ interposed her husband dryly.

‘Ah, well, that is settled,’ continued the lady gaily, leaving her victim no time to formulate more than the lamest of protests.

By this time they had reached the middle of the cape, and they stood for a moment by the lazy fountain looking down at the Marina straggling below the palms; and beyond, at the outline of the French coast, with white Mentone set in it, precisely, like a jewel.

‘The dear little place!’ cried Mrs. Dolond in a rapture; ‘I suppose Monaco is behind that cape. I wish we could see it. And it would not look a bit wicked from here. I declare, I should like to live there!’

‘I’ve no doubt you would, my dear!’ said her husband; ‘but you shan’t, so long as I have any voice in the matter. I don’t get so much for my pictures that I can afford to contribute to M. Blanc’s support.’

Rainham followed the direction of her eyes absently. 'I have half a mind to go with you after all,' he said.

'Of course,' said Mrs. Dollond; 'it will do you worlds of good; we will drive you over with us to-morrow. And now, Mr. Rainham, if you don't mind, I think we will sit down. I can see that Hugh is getting out his sketch-book.'

She sank down as she spoke upon one of the rough stone seats which are scattered about the cape. Mr. Dollond had ensconced himself behind them, and was phlegmatically starting on a rough study of the old town, which rose in a ragged, compact mass a hundred yards away, with its background of sad olives and sapphire sky.

Rainham followed the lady's example, tired himself by their scramble under the hot sun, and contented himself for awhile by turning a deaf ear and polite little mechanical gestures to her perennial flow of inconsequent chatter, which seemed quite impervious to fatigue, while he rested

his eyes on the charming prospect at their feet: the ragged descent of red rocks, broken here and there by patches of burnt grass and pink mallows, the little sea-girt chapel of St. Ampelio, and the waste of violet sea. His inattentive ear was caught at last by the name of Lightmark occurring, recurring, in the light eddy of his companion's speech, and he turned to her with an air of apologetic inquiry.

'Yes,' Mrs. Dollond was observing, 'it was quite a grand wedding; rather pre-tentious, you know, we thought it, for the Sylvesters—but, oh, a great affair! We stayed in London for it, although Hugh wanted to take a holiday. I could tell you all about the bridesmaids' dresses, and Mrs. Lightmark's, but I suppose you would not care. She looked very charming!'

'Yes?' said Rainham, with a curious light in his averted eyes. Then he added, somewhat abruptly, 'Brides always do, I suppose?'

'Of course, if they have a good dress-

maker. And the presents—there was quite a show. Your pearl necklace—how I envied her that! But, after all, weddings are so much alike.’

‘I have never been to one,’ said the other absently.

‘Ah, then you ought, if only to get a little experience before your own time comes, you know. Yes, you really ought to have been there. It was quite a foregone conclusion that you would be best man. It was so funny to see Colonel Lightmark in that *rôle*, with that young Mr. Sylvester giving away the bride. It would have been so much better if they could have changed parts.’

‘I am sorry to interrupt you,’ said Mr. Dollond, getting up and putting away his sketch-book; ‘I can’t sketch; the place is full of locusts, and they are getting into my boots.’

Mrs. Dollond started up, shaking her skirts apprehensively, with an affectation of horror.

‘How I do hate jumping things! And, anyhow, I suppose we ought to be getting back to our hotel, or we shall be late for dinner. You don’t know what Hugh can be like when one is late for dinner. He is capable of beginning without me.’

Rainham had risen with a ready response to her words, bordering almost on the ludicrous; and half an hour later he was congratulating himself that at least six seats intervened between his place and that of Mrs. Dollond at the dinner-table.

And yet on the morrow he found himself, and not without a certain relief, sitting beside the mundane little lady, and turning to her incessant ripple of speech something of the philosophic indifference to which her husband had attained, while a sturdy pair of gaily-caparisoned horses, whose bells made a constant accompaniment, not unpleasing in its preciseness, to the vagueness of Rainham’s thought, hurried them over the dusty surface of the Cornice.

Certainly the excursion into which he

had been inveigled, rather from indolence than from any freak of his inclination, afforded him, now that it was undertaken, a certain desultory pleasure to which he had long been a stranger. Into the little shrug, comic and valedictory, of Mrs. Dollond's shoulders, as they passed the *Octroi*, a gesture discreetly mocking of the conditions they had left, he could enter with some humour, the appreciation of a resident who still permitted himself at times the license of a casual visitor on his domain.

'Tell me,' Mrs. Dollond had asked, as they rattled out of the further gate of Ventimiglia, 'why did the excellent lady who tried to monopolize conversation in the *salon* last night appear so scandalized when I told her where we were going? Was I—surely now, Mr. Rainham, I was not indiscreet?'

'Ah, Mrs. Dollond,' said Rainham humorously, 'you know it was a delicate subject. At our hotel we don't recognise

Monte Carlo. We are divided upon the other topics in which we are interested: the intrigues of the lawn tennis club, and the orthodoxy of the English chaplain. But we are all orthodox about Monte Carlo, and Mrs. Engel is the pillar of our faith. We think it's——'

'The devil?' interrupted Mr. Dollond, bending forward a little, with his bland smile.

'Precisely,' said Rainham; 'that is what Mrs. Engel would say. Oh no, Mrs. Dollond, we don't drive over to Monte Carlo from Bordighera. At Mentone it is more regular; you see, you can get there from Mentone pretty much by accident. But from Bordighera it has too much the appearance of being a pre-concerted thing.'

'It was particularly preconcerted here,' put in the Academician with a yawn, and Mrs. Dollond remarked innocently that people who wintered in these places must have very singular ideas.

The prospect was increasing in beauty as they wound their way along the historical road, now rendered obscure by the thick groves of olives on either side, now varied by little glimpses of the sea, which again they skirted from time to time, and so nearly that, as Mrs. Dollond remarked, it was like driving along the sands. Rainham identified spots for them as the prospect widened, naming sea-girt Mortola with its snug château, Mentone lying placidly with its two bays in the westering sun, and, now and again, notorious peaks of the Alpes Maritimes which bounded the horizon beyond. At the frontier bridge of St. Louis, where they alighted to meet the requirements of the Douane, even Mrs. Dollond's frivolity was changed into silent admiration of the savage beauty of the gorge. They stood for awhile leaning upon the desolate bridge, turning reluctantly from the great beetling rocks of the ravine above to gaze with strange qualms into the yawning precipice beneath.

Rainham pointed out the little thread of white which was the one dangerous pathway down the gorge, confessing his sympathy with the fatal fascination with which it had filled so many—he mentioned the name of a young Englishman staying at Mentone the year before amongst the number—at the ultimate cost of their lives.

‘Horrible!’ exclaimed Mrs. Dollond, retreating to the carriage, which awaited them on the French side of the bridge. ‘I shall dream of it to-night.’

‘I have dreamt of it,’ said Rainham simply. ‘When I was a boy I used to dream of climbing to the edge of the world and falling over. Nowadays, I dream of dropping over the Pont St. Louis: the sensation is much the same.’

‘A very disagreeable one, I should think,’ said Mrs. Dollond, settling herself in her wraps with a little shudder.

‘No,’ said Rainham, with a smile. ‘I think, Mrs. Dollond, it was rather nice:’

it was the waking up which was disagreeable.'

They made their breakfast—a very late one—at Mentone, and dawdled over it, Mr. Dollond having disappeared at the last moment, and been found, after a lengthy search, sketching, in serene disregard of the inappropriateness of the occasion, a doorway in St. Michele.

When at last they drove into the principality, the evening was well advanced. Even the irrepressible Mrs. Dollond was not to be enticed by the brilliant windows of the Casino from the sofa upon which she had stretched herself luxuriously, when their extensive dinner was at an end ; and Rainham with a clear conscience could betake himself immediately to bed. But, in spite of his fatigue, he lay for a long time awake ; the music of the concert-room, the strains of M. Oudshorn's skilful orchestra, floated in through the half-closed *persiennes* of his room, and later mingled with his dreams, tinging them, perhaps,

with some of that indefinable plaintiveness, a sort of sadness essentially ironical, with which all dance - music, even the most extravagant, is deeply pervaded.

A week later, as from the window of the receding Italian train he caught a last glimpse of the Dollonds on the crowded platform, he waved a polite farewell to them with a sensible relief. It was a week in which Mrs. Dollond had been greatly on his hands, for her husband had made no secret of the willingness with which he had accepted Rainham's escort for the indefatigable lady amongst the miscellaneous company of the tables, leaving him free to study the picturesque in the less heated atmosphere which he preferred. And a week of Mrs. Dollond, as Rainham was obliged to confess, was not good for any man to undergo.

Nor was Mrs. Dollond's verdict upon their acquaintance, who had become for the space of seven days an intimate, more complimentary.

‘I suppose he was better than nobody,’ she remarked with philosophy as they made their way up the terrace. ‘He looked after my stakes, and did not play much himself, and was always at hand; but he was really very dull.’

‘Better than me, I suppose you mean, my dear?’ suggested her husband humorously. ‘Was he so dull? You ought to know: I really have hardly spoken to him.’

‘Don’t be absurd!’ she remarked absently. Then she said a little abruptly: ‘It seems funny, now that one knows him, that there should be those stories.’

‘Stories? About Rainham?’

Her husband glanced at her with some surprise.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Of course, you never know anything; but he is talked about.’

‘Ah, poor man!’ said Mr. Dollond. ‘What has he done?’

Mrs. Dollond’s fair eyebrows were arched significantly, and Mrs. Dollond’s

gay shoulders shrugged with a gesture of elision, in which the essence of many scandals, generated and discussed in the discreet undertones of the ladies' hour, was nicely distributed.

‘Don't be dense, Hugh! It is quite notorious!’

Mr. Dollond laughed his broad, tolerant laugh.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I should never have thought it.’

Rainham, reaching his hotel the same afternoon, met Mrs. Engel in the hall; her formal bow, in which frosty disapproval of the sin, and a widow's tenderness for the middle-aged sinner, if repentant, were discreetly mingled, amused if it scarcely flattered him. He was still smiling at his recollection of the interview when the Swiss porter, accosting him in elaborately bad English, informed him that a lady and gentleman, who had left on the previous evening, had made particular inquiries after him. The name, he

confessed, escaped him, but if Monsieur pleased—— He produced the visitors' book, in which Rainham read, scarcely now with surprise, the brief inscription, 'Mr. and Mrs. Lightmark, from Cannes.'

CHAPTER XVII.

THERE was a ceaseless hum of voices in the labyrinth of brilliant rooms, with their atmosphere of transient spring sunshine and permeating faint odour of fresh paint. Few people came to see the pictures, which covered the walls with a crude patchwork of seas and goddesses, portraits and landscapes : those that by popular repute were worth seeing had been exhibited already to the people who were now invited to view them, at the studios on Show Sunday and on the Outsiders' Day. One entered the gloomy gates of Burlington House on the yearly occasion of the Private View because it was, socially, a great public function ; in order to see the

celebrities, who were sure to be there, from the latest actress to the newest bishop. In one corner a belated critic endeavoured to scratch hasty impressions on his shirt-cuff or the margin of a little square catalogue; in another an interested dealer used his best endeavours to rivet a patron's attention on the merits of his speculative purchase. The providers of the feast were not so much in evidence as their wives and daughters; the artist often affects to despise the occasion, and contents himself with a general survey—frequently limited to his own pictures—on Varnishing Day.

The Hanging Committee had dealt kindly with Lightmark's Academy picture. When it was passed in review before these veterans, after a long procession of inanely smiling portraits, laboured wooden landscapes, and preternaturally developed heroes, the expression of satiated boredom and damnation of draughts, which variously pervaded the little row of arbitrators, was

for a moment dissipated. There was a movement of chairs, followed by an exchange of complimentary murmurs; and the picture was finally niched into a space which happened to fit it between two life-size portraits on the line in one of the smaller rooms.

On the fashionable afternoon Lightmark's work was never without the little admiring crowd which denotes a picture of more than usual interest. The canvas, which had loomed so large in the new studio in Grove Road, was smaller than many of its neighbours, but its sombre strength of colour, relieved by the pale, silvery gold of its wide frame, and the white dresses of the ladies portrayed in the pictures on either side, made it at once noticeable.

The critics next day referred to it as a nocturne in black and gold, and more than one of the daily journals contained an enthusiastic description of the subject—an ocean-steamer entering a Thames graving-

dock at night-time, with torchlight effects, and a mist on the river.

Eve fluttered delightedly from room to room with her mother, recurring always to the neighbourhood of her husband's picture, and receiving congratulations by the score. It had been a disappointment to her when her husband, at the eleventh hour, expressed his inability to be present; but even Mrs. Sylvester's remonstrances had failed to move him, and the two ladies had come under the Colonel's escort.

'I didn't know your husband was so nervous,' said Mrs. Dollond sceptically. 'Is this the effect of matrimony? . . . Oh, Mrs. Lightmark, do look at that creature in peacock blue! Did you ever see such a gown? Have you seen my husband's pictures? He's got one in every room, nearly. Between you and me, they're all of them pretty bad; but so long as people don't know any better, and buy them, what does it matter? Ah, Colonel Lightmark, how do you do? Of

course I've seen your nephew's picture. I've been saying all sorts of nice things about it to Mrs. Lightmark.'

'It's pretty good, I suppose,' suggested the Colonel radiantly. 'Have you seen the *Outcry* this week? There's no end of a good notice about it, and about your husband's pictures, too.'

'Really? I wonder who wrote it. I must ask him to dinner, if he's respectable. We never read critiques nowadays. They're so dreadfully rude to Academicians, you know—always talking about "pot-boilers," and suggesting that they ought to retire on their laurels. As if laurels were any good! One can't keep a carriage on laurels.'

'No, by Jove! it wouldn't be good for the horses. I say, though, Mrs. Dollond, is one supposed to go through all the rooms?'

'Oh yes,' replied the lady composedly; 'all except the water-colours, and sculpture, and architecture. One only goes there to

flirt, as a rule. Personally, I always get up the pictures from "Academy Notes," when I haven't seen them at the studios, you know. Yes; I should like some tea, please, since Mrs. Lightmark has deserted you. Is that Lady Garnett with her? What lovely white hair! I wonder where she gets it.'

Lady Garnett shrugged her shoulders a little petulantly after she had made the ghost of a return to Mrs. Dollond's airy greeting.

'My dear,' she said, turning to Eve confidentially, 'may I confess to you that I am not altogether too fond of that woman? Is she a great friend of yours, or don't you know her well enough to abuse her? I like the husband; he amuses me, though he is rather a bear. Otherwise, I should not see very much of Mrs. Dollond, I promise you.'

Eve smiled at the thought of Mr. Dollond's eccentricities, and then her face grew rather grave.

‘Shall we go into the lecture-room?’ she suggested. ‘It is cooler there among the statues, and perhaps we shall be able to sit down.’

The old lady assented with alacrity.

‘Yes,’ she said; ‘by all means let us leave these painty pictures, and we will have a chat; you shall tell me of your wanderings. Apropos, did you see anything of our friend Philip? His last letter—a long time ago; he is becoming a bad correspondent—struck me as rather *triste*, even for him. I’m afraid he is not well.’

‘Yes,’ said Eve slowly; ‘we went over to Bordighera one day while we were at Cannes, and we stayed a night at the hotel, but we didn’t see Mr. Rainham. He had gone over to Monte Carlo.’

‘Ah, poor fellow, what an idea! I wonder what dragged him there.’

Eve looked at the old lady questioningly for a minute.

‘I think he went with the Dollonds,’ she answered gravely.

‘Ah, my dear, no wonder his letter was dull! Then you didn’t see him? Well, I suppose he will come back soon. You mustn’t be jealous of him, you know. He is very much *lié* with your husband, isn’t he?’

‘I don’t suppose he will see quite so much of him now.’

There seemed to be a trace of weariness in the girl’s voice as she answered, and Lady Garnett glanced at her sharply before she let her eyes continue their task of wandering in a kind of absent scrutiny of the sculptured exhibits in the room.

‘But of course not. . . . How terrible all these great plaster figures are, and the busts, too! They are so dreary, they have the air of being made for a cemetery. Don’t they make you think of tombstones and mausoleums?’

Eve looked at her a little wonderingly.

‘Are they very bad? Do you know,

I rather like them. Not so much as the pictures, of course ; but, still, I think some of them are charming, though I am rather glad Dick isn't a sculptor. Don't you like that? What is it—Bacchus on a panther?'

'My dear, you are quite right,' said the old lady decisively, dropping her tortoiseshell lorgnon into her lap, and suppressing a yawn. 'Only, it is you who are charming! I must go to the Grosvenor as soon as it opens to see if your clever husband, who seems to be able to paint everything and everybody, has done you justice. . . . But you mustn't sit talking to an old grumbler like me any longer. Go back to your picture; Mr. Dollond will pilot you. And if you encounter Mary on the way, tell her that a certain discontented old lady of her acquaintance wants to be taken home. Au revoir.'

About five minutes later Mary Masters found her aunt half asleep. The paint had made her stupid, she said. She could understand now why painters did not

improve as they grew older: it was the smell of the paint.

‘Ah,’ she said, as they passed out into the busy whirl of Piccadilly, ‘how glad I shall be to get back to my Masons and Corots. Though I like that pretty little Mrs. Lightmark. . . . Poor Philip! Now tell me whom you saw. Charles Sylvester, of course? But no, I am too sleepy now; you shall tell me all about it after dinner.’

It was six o’clock before the Colonel was able to deposit his bulky military person rather stiffly on a cushioned seat, and to remove his immaculate silk hat, with an expression of weary satisfaction. He had devoted all the sunny spring afternoon (when he might have been at Hurlingham, or playing whist at the ‘Rag’) to making his way, laboriously and apologetically, from room to room in search of friends and acquaintances, whom, when found, he would convoy strategically into the immediate vicinity of No. 37 in the First Room.

‘My nephew’s picture,’ he explained; ‘nice thing! I don’t know much about painting’ (he called it paintin’) ‘and art, and all that sort of thing, but I believe it’s about as good as they make them.’

He had accepted all the inconsistent, murmured criticism almost as a personal tribute; and for the greater part at least of the afternoon his beaming face had completely belied the discomfort occasioned by his severe frock-coat and tightly-fitting patent-leather boots; and his yearning for a comfortable chair, with a box of cigars and a whisky-and-seltzer at his elbow, had been suppressed, rigidly and heroically.

‘I suppose it’s devilish good,’ he thought, as he sat waiting for the rest of his party. ‘People seem to admire those splashes of yellow and black, and all those dirty colours. Personally, I think I prefer the girl in white next door. Hullo, there’s Eve!’

‘Don’t get up, Colonel,’ said Mrs.

Sylvester ; 'we want to sit here for a little and hear what people say about Richard's picture. They make such amusing remarks sometimes! Not always complimentary ; but, then, they often don't know anything about art.'

'Yes,' said Eve, seating herself, with a delicate consideration for the new dress which the occasion had demanded, between the Colonel and her mother ; 'we heard someone say that the flesh in that big Roman picture with the temple, you know—I can't pronounce the name—was like cotton wool—pink cotton wool! Oh, and that the girl in black, with the yellow fan, whose portrait is in the big room, must be at least eight feet high!'

'Now, how the dickens could he tell that!' interposed the Colonel.

'Oh, he was talking very learnedly, about heads and things. How provoking of that old gentleman in the gold spectacles! Standing just in front of Dick's picture with his back to it. He looks just exactly

like a millionaire, and he won't look, and he's preventing other people from looking! Do turn him round, uncle, or move him on, or something!

'Do you see that man there?' whispered Mrs. Sylvester presently, 'the tall man with the sandy hair and beard? I think he's a painter. He said just now that Richard's picture was amazingly good, and that he thought he knew where he got the idea from.'

'Why, of course,' said the Colonel carelessly, 'Dick got the idea from that beggar what's-his-name's dock—and a thundering good idea too! I wonder what time they close? Perhaps——'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Sylvester, buttoning her gloves, 'I suppose we had better go.'

The room was nearly empty when McAllister passed before his friend's picture again, after a satisfactory interview with a gentleman from Bond Street on the subject of one of his own. McAllister, whose criticism Mrs. Syl-

vester had overheard and reported, had recently been elected Associate, owing the honour, according to some malicious people, more to his nationality than to his merit as a painter of cattle and landscapes. The *Outcry*, indeed, with reference to this promotion, and the continued neglect of older artists of greater public repute, had suggested, with its usual impertinence, that the motto of '*Lasciate ogni speranza*,' which was reported in certain circles to be almost visibly inscribed over the door of the Academicians' Committee-room, should be supplemented by the legend 'No English need apply.'

'It's good,' he said reflectively, as he stopped in front of the picture, with something like a chuckle on his lips, and a twinkle in his shrewd gray eyes. 'More than good. You can see the clever French trick in every line of it, and they'll call it one of the pictures of the year. So it is, though there are dozens

in the vaults downstairs worth two of it. But I thought this was Oswyn's subject? He was always talking about it. Well, I should like to see what he would have made of it!

CHAPTER XVIII.

As the clock struck five Rainham looked up with an air of relief, flipping negligently across the table the heap of papers which had occupied him since lunch-time.

‘We must go into this some other time, Bullen,’ he remarked with a certain petulance. ‘I confess things look rather bad; but I suppose they can hold over till to-morrow?’

The foreman assented dubiously, gathering together the despised sheets, and preparing for departure.

‘I’ve done my best, sir,’ he said a little sullenly; ‘but it is difficult for things to go smoothly when the master is always away;

and you never will take no notice of business letters, you know, sir.'

'Yes, yes,' said Rainham wearily; 'I am sure you have, Bullen. If I go into the Bankruptcy Court, as you so frequently prophesy, it will be entirely my own fault. In the meantime you might tell your wife to send me up some tea—for two, Bullen, please. Mr. Oswyn will be up presently.'

The man retired, shutting the door with some ardour. Rainham rose, and, with the little expansive shrug with which he usually discarded his commercial worries, wandered towards the window. The dock was empty and desolate; the rain, which had prevailed with a persistent dreariness since the morning, built morasses at regular intervals along the dock-side, and splashed unceasingly into the stagnant green water which collected in slack seasons within the dock-gates. The dockman stood, one disconsolate figure in the general blankness, with his high boots and oilskins, smoking a short clay pipe by the door of the engine-

room ; and further out, under the dripping dome of an umbrella, sat Oswyn in a great pea-jacket, smoking, painting the mist, the rain, the white river with its few blurred barges and its background of dreary warehouses, in a supreme disregard of the dank discomfort of his surroundings.

Rainham had tapped three times against the streaming pane before he succeeded in attracting his attention, and then the painter only responded to the wonted signal by an impatient, deprecating flourish of the hand which held the palette. The tea was already simmering on the rickety table in the bow-window, when Oswyn, staggering under his impedimenta, climbed the staircase, and shouldered his way familiarly into the room.

‘How fearfully wet you must be!’ said his host lazily from the depths of an arm-chair. ‘Help yourself to a pair of slippers and a dry coat, and have some tea. It’s strong enough even for you by this time.’

The other had disembarrassed himself of

his dripping jacket and overalls, and now kicked off his shoes, with a short laugh. He was never a great talker in the daytime, and the dreary charm of the river world outside was still upon him. He dropped the sketch upon which he had been working rather contemptuously against the wall, where Rainham could see it, and selected a pair of slippers from quite a small heap in the corner by the fireplace.

‘I don’t mind *your* seeing my work, because you don’t talk about it,’ he said, glancing at Rainham quickly. ‘I hate people who try to say complimentary things; they don’t often mean them, and when they do they talk absolute rot.’

‘Yes,’ said the other sympathetically. ‘Shall I put a slice of lemon in your tea? I suppose I must live up to my reputation and say nothing about the sketch. But I must have it when it’s finished! It’s always most embarrassing to have to pay personal compliments, though I suppose some people like them.’

The painter grunted inarticulately between two sips of tea.

‘Like them! Don’t your society artists and authors simply wallow in them? Have you got any cigarettes, or papers? I dropped mine into a puddle. Ah, thanks. . . . That’s a pretty face. Whose is it?’

The cigarette case which Rainham handed to his guest was a well-worn leather one, a somewhat ladylike article, with a photograph fitted into the dividing flap inside. Before answering the question he looked at the photograph absently for a moment, when the case had been returned to him.

‘It’s not a very good photograph. It’s meant for—for Mrs. Lightmark, when she was a little girl. She gave me the case with the portrait years ago, in Florence.’

Oswyn glanced at him curiously and shrewdly through a thin haze of blue smoke, watching him restore the faded little receptacle almost reverentially to the breast-pocket of his coat.

‘Have you been to the Chamber of Horrors?’ he asked suddenly, after a silent pause, broken only by the ceaseless lashing of the window by the raindrops.

Rainham looked up with a start, half puzzled, seeking and finding an explanation in the faint conscious humour which loosened the lines about the speaker’s mouth.

‘The Chamber of—— Do you mean the R.A.? You do, you most irreverent of mortals! No, I have not been yet. Will you go with me?’

‘Heaven forbid! I have been once.’

‘You have? And they didn’t scalp you?’

‘I didn’t stay long enough, I suppose. I only went to see one picture—Light-mark’s.’

‘Ah, that’s just what I want to see! And you know I still have a weakness for the show. I expect *you* would like the new Salon better.’

‘There are good things there,’ said

Oswyn tersely, 'and a great many abominations as well. I was over in Paris last week.'

Rainham glanced at him over his cup with a certain surprise.

'I didn't know you ever went there now,' he remarked.

'No, I never go if I can help it. I hate Paris; it is *triste* as a well, and full of ghosts. Ghosts! It's a city of the dead. But I had a picture there this time, and I went to look at it.'

'In the new Salon?'

'In the new Salon. It was a little gray, dusky thing, three foot by two, and their flaming miles of canvas murdered it. I am not a scene-painter,' he went on a little savagely. 'I don't paint with a broom, and I have no ambition to do the sun, or an eruption of Vesuvius. So I doubt if I shall exhibit there again until the vogue alters. Oh, they are clever enough, those fellows! even the trickiest of them can draw, which is the last thing they learn

here, and one or two are men of genius. But I should dearly like to set them down, *en plein air* too, if they insist upon it, with the palette of Velasquez. I went out and wandered in the Morgue afterwards, and I confess its scheme of colour rested my eyes.'

'Do I know your picture?' asked Rainham to change the subject, finding him a little grim. 'Is it the thing you were doing here?'

Oswyn's head rested on one thin, colour-stained hand which shaded his eyes.

'No,' he said with a suggestion of constraint, 'it was an old sketch which I had worked up—not the thing you knew. I shall not finish that——'

'Not finish it!' cried Rainham. 'But of course you must! why, it was superb; it promised a masterpiece!'

'To tell you the truth,' said Oswyn, 'I can't finish it. I have painted it out.'

Rainham glanced at him with an air of consternation, of reproach.

‘My dear fellow,’ he said, ‘you are impossible! What in the world possessed you to do such a mad thing?’

The painter hesitated a moment, looking at him irresolutely beneath his heavy knitted brows.

‘I meant to tell you,’ he said, after a while; ‘but on the whole I think I would rather not. It is rather an unpleasant subject, Rainham, and if you don’t mind we will change it.’

Oswyn had risen from his chair, with his wonted restlessness, and was gazing out upon the lazy evening life of the great river. The monotonous accompaniment to their conversation, which had been so long sustained by the drip and splash outside, had grown intermittent, and now all but ceased; while a faint tinge of yellowish white upon the ripples, and a feathery rift in the gray dome of sky, announced a final effort on the part of the setting sun.

The yard door swung noisily on its hinges, and a light step and voice became

audible, and the sound of familiar conference with the dockman. Rainham lifted his head inquiringly, and Oswyn, shrugging his shoulders, left the window and regained his seat, picking up his sketch on the way.

‘Yes,’ he said in answer to a more direct inquiry on the other’s part, ‘I think it was Lightmark.’

Almost as he spoke there was a step on the stair, followed by a boisterous knock at the door, and Dick entered effusively.

‘Well, *mon vieux*, how goes it? Why, you’re all in the dark! They didn’t tell me you were engaged. . . . Oh, is that you, Oswyn? How do you do?’

‘Quite an unexpected pleasure?’ suggested Oswyn sardonically, nodding over his shoulder at the new-comer from his seat by the fire.

Rainham’s greeting had been far more cordial, and he still held his friend’s hand between his own, gazing inquiringly into his face, as if he wished to read something there.

‘Yes, I am back, you see,’ he said presently, when Dick had found himself a chair. ‘I have been here two days, and I was just beginning to think of looking you up. I was very sorry to miss you at Bordighera. How is Eve? It’s very good of you to come all this way to see me; you must be pretty busy.’

‘Oh, Eve is tremendously well! Thanks, no, I won’t have any tea, but you might give me a whisky-and-soda. I had to come down into these wilds to look at a yacht which we think of taking for the summer. Quite a small one,’ he added half apologetically, as he detected the faint amused surprise in the other’s expression; ‘and as I found myself here, with a few minutes to spare before my train goes, I thought I would look in, on the off chance of finding you. How is business just now? The dock didn’t strike me as looking much like work as I came in. Pretty stagnant, eh?’

Rainham shook his head.

‘Oh, it’s much as usual—perhaps a little more so! Bullen continues to threaten me with bankruptcy, but I am getting used to it. Threatened men live long, you know.’

‘Oh, you’re all right!’ answered Dick genially. ‘As long as Bullen looks after you, you won’t come to grief.’

While the two were thus occupied in reuniting the chain of old associations, Oswyn had been silently, almost surreptitiously, preparing for departure; and he now came forward awkwardly, with his hat in one hand and the tools of his trade under his arm.

‘Māy I leave some of these things here, or will they be in your way?’

‘But you’re not going?’ said Rainham, rising from his seat with a constraining gesture; ‘why, don’t you remember we were going to dine together? Dick will stay too, *n’est ce pas?* It will be like old times. Mrs. Bullen has been preparing quite a feast, I assure you!’

Oswyn paused irresolutely.

‘Don’t let me drive you away,’ said Dick. ‘In any case I’m going myself in a few minutes. Yes,’ he added, turning to Rainham, ‘I’m very sorry, but I’ve got to take my wife out to dinner, and I shall have to catch a train in, let me see, about ten minutes.’

‘Really? Well, then, clearly you must sit down again, Oswyn; I won’t be left alone at any price. That’s right. Now, Dick, tell me what you have been doing, and especially all about your Academy picture; I haven’t seen even a critique of it. Of course it’s a success? Have you sold it?’

‘Oh, spare my modesty!’ protested Lightmark somewhat clumsily, with a quick glance at Oswyn. ‘It’s all right, but we mustn’t talk shop.’

‘Yes, for God’s sake spare his modesty!’ supplemented the other painter almost brutally. ‘Look at his blushes. It isn’t so bad as all that, Lightmark.’

‘I don’t even know the subject,’ pursued Rainham. ‘You might at least tell me what it was. Was it the canvas which you wouldn’t show me, just before I went away—at the studio? The one about which you made such a mystery——?’

‘Oh bosh, old man!’ interrupted Dick hurriedly, ‘I never made any mystery. It—it wasn’t that. It’s quite an ordinary subject, one of the river scenes which I sketched here. You had better go and see it. And come and see us. You know the address. I must be off!’

‘Wait a minute,’ interposed Oswyn, with a cadence in his voice which struck Rainham as the signal of something surpassing his wonted eccentricity. ‘Don’t go yet. I said just now, Rainham, that I wouldn’t tell you why I had painted out that picture, the picture which I had been fool enough to talk about so much, which I had intended to make a masterpiece. Well, I have changed my mind. I think you ought to know. Perhaps you would

prefer to tell him?' he added, turning savagely to Lightmark, and speaking fast and loud, with the curious muscular tremor which betokens difficult restraint. 'No? Of course you will have the impudence to pretend that the conception was yours. Yes, curse you! you are quite capable of swearing that it was all yours—subject and treatment too. . . . But you can't deny that you heard me talking of the thing night after night at the club, when I have no doubt you hadn't even begun on your bastard imitation. One of the pictures of the year as they call it, as you and your damned crew of flatterers and critics call it. . . .'

He stopped for breath, clutching at the table with one hand and letting the other, which had been upraised in denunciation, fall at his side. He had meant to be calm, to limit himself strictly to an explanation; but in the face of his wrong and the wrong-doer the man's passionate nature had broken loose. Now, when he already

half repented of the violence with which he had profaned the house of his friend, his eyes fell upon Rainham, and he felt abashed before the expression of pain which he had called into the other's face.

'I don't know what all this means,' said Rainham wearily, turning from Oswyn to Dick as he spoke; 'but surely it is all wrong? Be quiet, Dick; you needn't say anything. If Oswyn is accusing you of plagiarism, of stealing his ideas, I can't believe it. I can't believe you meant to wrong him. The same thing must have occurred to both of you. Why, Oswyn, surely you see that? You have both been painting here, and you were both struck in the same way. Nothing could be simpler.'

Now Lightmark seemed to assume a more confident attitude, to become more like himself; and he was about to break the chain of silence, which had held him almost voiceless throughout Oswyn's

attack, when Rainham again interrupted him.

‘I am sure you needn’t say anything, Dick. We all know Oswyn; he—he wasn’t serious. Go and catch your train, and forget all about it.’

The first words which Rainham spoke recalled to Oswyn the powerful reason which had determined him to preserve his old neutrality, and to make an offering of silence upon the altar of his regard for the only man with whom he could feel that he had something in common. If his vengeance could have vented itself upon a single victim, it would have fallen, strong and sure; but it was clear to his calmer self that this could not be; the consequences would be too far-reaching, and might even recoil upon himself. After all, what did it matter? There was a certain luxury in submission to injustice, a pleasure in watching the bolt of Nemesis descend when his hands were guiltless of the launching. And as he struggled with

himself, hunting in retrospect for some excuse for what his passion railed at as weakness, a last straw fell into the scale, for he thought of the faded portrait in the cigarette-case.

CHAPTER XIX.

‘MY dear!’ said Lady Garnett, accepting a cup of tea from the hands of her niece, and regarding her at the same time, from her low cushioned chair, with a certain drollery, ‘do you know that it is exactly one week since Mr. Sylvester called?’

Mary Masters’ head was bent a little over her long Suède gloves—they had just returned from their afternoon drive in the Park—and she paused to remove her hat and veil before she replied.

‘And it is at least three weeks since Mr. Rainham was here.’

‘Ah, poor Philip!’ remarked the old lady, ‘he is always irregular; he may come, or he may not. I must ask him to

dinner, by the way, soon. But I was talking of Mr. Sylvester, who is a model of punctuality. (Give me a piece of *baba* for Mefistofele, please!) Mr. Sylvester was here last Saturday, and the Saturday before that. I think it is highly probable, Mary, that we shall be honoured with a visit from Mr. Sylvester to-day.'

'I hope not!' said the girl with some energy. 'I have a couple of songs that I must positively try over before to-night. Surely, it is a little late too, even for Mr. Sylvester?'

'It is barely half-past five,' said Lady Garnett, lazily feeding her pug, 'and he knows that we do not dine till eight. Resign yourself, *chérie*; he will certainly come.'

She glanced across at the young girl, pointing, with her keen gaze, words which seemed trivial enough. And Mary, her calm forehead puckered with a certain vague annoyance which she disdained to analyze, understood perfectly all that the

elder lady was too discreet to say. She sat for a little while, her hands resting idly in her lap, or smoothing the creases out of her long, soft gloves. Then she rose and moved quickly across to Lady Garnett's side, and knelt suddenly down by her chair.

'Ah, my aunt!' she cried impulsively, 'tell me what is to be done?'

Lady Garnett glanced up from the novel into which she had subsided; she laid it on the little tea-table with a sigh of relief at this sudden mood of confidence, coming a little strangely amidst the young girl's habitual reticence.

'We will talk, my dear,' she said, 'now you are practical. I suppose, by the way, he has not proposed?'

Mary shook her head.

'That is it, Aunt Marcelle! That is exactly what I want to prevent. Is—is he going to?'

Lady Garnett smiled, and her smile had a very definite quality indeed.

'I would not cherish any false hopes,

my dear. Charles Sylvester is a young man—not so very young though, by the way—whose conclusions are very slow, but when they arrive, *mon Dieu!* they are durable. I am sure he is terribly tenacious. It took him a long time to conclude that he was in love with you; at first, you know, he was a little troubled about your fortune, but at last he came to that conclusion—at Lucerne.’

‘Oh, at Lucerne!’ protested the young girl with a nervous laugh. ‘Surely not there!’

‘It was precisely at Lucerne,’ continued Lady Garnett, ‘that he decided you would make him an adorable wife, and, in effect, it was a considerable piece of wisdom. And since then his conclusions have been more rapid. The last has been that he will certainly marry you—with or without a *dot*—before the elections. You are serious, you know, my dear, though not so serious as he believes; you are a girl of intelligence, and he is going to stand for

some place or other, and candidates with clever wives often obtain a majority over candidates who are clever but have no wives. Yes, my dear, he is certainly going to propose. You may postpone it by the use of great tact for a month or so; you will hardly do so for longer.'

'I don't want to postpone it,' said Mary ruefully; 'if it be inevitable, I would sooner have it over.'

'It will never be over,' remarked Lady Garnett decisively. 'Did I not say that he was tenacious—*comme on ne l'est plus*? You may refuse him once—twice; it will all be to go over again and again, until you end by accepting him.'

'Oh, Aunt Marcelle!' protested the young girl, with a little flush of righteous wrath.

'After all,' continued the elder lady, ignoring her interruption, 'are you so very sure that—that it would not do? There are many worse men in the world than Sylvester. Both *my* husbands were pro-

fligates, in addition to being fools. At any rate, this dear Charles is very correct. And remember the poor man is really in love with you.'

'I know,' said Mary plaintively; 'that is why I am so sorry. He is a good man, a conscientious man, and a gentleman; and really, sometimes lately he has been quite simple and nice. Only——'

Lady Garnett completed the sentence for her with an impartial shrug.

'Only he is perfectly ridiculous, and as a lover quite impossible? My dear, I grant it you with all my heart, and I think he has all the qualities which make an excellent husband.'

As the young girl was still silent, unconvinced, she went on after a little while:

'You know, Mary, I have never tried to marry you. Frankly, my dear, I do not believe very much in pushing marriages. My own, and most others that I have known intimately, might have been very reasonably made—let us say—in purgatory.'

But a girl must marry some time or other, if she be rich. And you will have plenty of money, my poor child! You shall do exactly as you please, but I must admit that Charles is a most unobjectionable *parti*. After all, there is only one other man I would sooner give you to, Mary, and he is impossible.'

'Aunt Marcelle! Aunt Marcelle!' pleaded the young girl faintly, her dark head bent very low now over the arm of the chair.

Lady Garnett had been talking so far in a somewhat desultory fashion, interspersing her words with brief caresses to the pug who was curled up in her lap. Now she put down the little dog with a brusqueness which hurt his dignity; he pawed fretfully at Mary's dress, and, attracting no attention, trotted off to his basket on the rug, where he settled himself with a short growl of discontent. And Lady Garnett, with a sudden change of tone and a new tenderness in her voice, just stooped a little and

touched the young girl's forehead with her thin lips.

'My poor child!' she said, 'my dear little Mary! Did you suppose I didn't know? Did you think I was blind, as well as very old, that I shouldn't see the change in you, and guess why?'

'Ah!' cried the girl with a break in her voice. 'What are you saying? What do you make me say?'

'Nothing! nothing!' said the old lady; 'you need not tell me anything. It is only I who tell you—like the old immortal in Daudet, *J'ai vu ça moi!*—and it will pass as everything passes. That is not the least sad part, though now you will hardly believe it. You see, I don't lie to you; I tell you quite plainly that it is no good. Some men are made so—*vois tu, ma chérie!*—to see only one woman, an inaccessible one, when they seem to see many, and *he* would be like that. Only it is a pity. And yet who would have foreseen it—that he should charm you, Mary?'

He so tired and old and *usé*—for he is old for you, dear, though he might be my son—with his humorous, indolent, mocking talk and his great sad eyes. It's wicked of me, Mary, but I love you for it; so few girls would have cared, for he *is* a wretched match. And I blame myself, too.'

'Because I am foolish and utterly ashamed?' cried the girl from her obscurity, in a hard, small voice which the other did not know.

'Foolish!' she exclaimed. 'Well, we women are all that, and some men—the best of them. But ashamed? Because you have a wise mother, my darling, who guesses things? I have never had any children but you and him. And no one but I can ever know. No; I was sorry because I had to hurt you. But it was best, my dear, because you are so strong. Yes, you are strong, Mary!'

'Am I?' said the girl wearily. 'What is the good of it, I wonder? Except that it makes one suffer more and longer.'

‘No,’ said Lady Garnett. ‘It makes one show it less, and only that matters. Aren’t we going to Lady Dulminster to-night? Ah, my dear, the play must go on; we mustn’t spoil the fun with sour faces, masks, and dominos except now and then!—Believe me, *chérie*, underneath it all we are much the same—very sad people. Only it wouldn’t do to admit it. Life would be too terrible then. So we dance on and make believe we enjoy it, and by-and-by, if we play hard enough, we do believe it for a minute or two. From one point of view, you know, it is rather amusing.’

Mary looked up at last; her eyes, shining out of the white face, seemed to have grown suddenly very large and bright.

‘Does it go on always, Aunt Marcelle?’ she asked with a child’s directness.

‘Always!’ said Lady Garnett promptly. ‘Only there are interludes, and then sometimes one guest steals away with his bosom

friend into a corner, and they look under each other's masks. But it isn't a nice sight, and it mustn't happen very often, else they wouldn't be back in their places when the music began. Ah, my child! she broke off suddenly, 'I am talking nonsense to amuse you, and making you sadder all the time. But, you know, I think nobody was ever consoled by consolations unless it were the consoler.'

She drew the girl's blank face towards her, clasping the smooth brown head against her breast with two little hands on which the diamonds glittered.

'Cry, my dear!' she said at last; 'that is the best of being young—that gift of tears. When one is old one laughs instead; but ah, *mon Dieu!* it is a queer kind of laughter.'

They sat locked together in silence until the room was quite dark, lit only by the vague lamplight which shone in through the fine lace curtains from the street. Then Mary rose and played a little, very

softly, in the darkness, morsels of Chopin, until the footman came in with a bright lamp, announcing that dinner was on the table. And Charles Sylvester had not arrived.

He atoned for this breach of his habit, however, on the morrow, by making an early call upon the two ladies, whom he found alone, immediately after luncheon. He was very clean shaven, very carefully dressed, and with his closely buttoned frock-coat and his irreproachable hat, which he held ponderously in his hand during his protracted visit, he had the air of having come immediately from church.

Lady Garnett taxed him with this occupation presently, suppressing her further thought that he looked still more like an aspirant to matrimony, and Charles admitted the impeachment; he had been in the morning with his sister, Mrs. Lightmark, to the Temple Church. His severe gaze was turned inquiringly upon Mary.

Lady Garnett responded for her a little flippantly.

‘Oh, Mary went nowhere this morning, Mr. Sylvester—not even to the church parade. We were very late last night, at Lady Dulminster’s. London grows later and later; we shall be dining at midnight soon.’

‘I should like to go to the Temple Church sometimes,’ said Mary, ‘because of the singing, only it is so very far.’

Charles Sylvester bent forward with bland satisfaction; he had it so obviously on the tip of his tongue that he would be charmed to be her escort, that the girl hastened to interrupt him.

‘You were not at Lady Dulminster’s, Mr. Sylvester? We quite expected to see you.’

‘If I had known that you were to be there!’ he exclaimed. Then he added: ‘I had a card, and, indeed, I fully intended to look in. But one is always so pressed for time just before the long vacation, and

yesterday I was quite exhausted. Did you see any of my people?’

‘Yes,’ said Mary, ‘Eve was there; we expected her to play. It is a very musical house.’

‘Ah, yes! I have heard so from my sister, and from Colonel Lightmark. He says that Lady Dulminster is really a most accomplished woman.’

‘He looks as if he found her charming,’ put in Lady Garnett with a shrug. Then she added, suppressing a yawn, her thin fingers dallying regretfully with the leaves of her novel: ‘I suppose your exertions are nearly over, Mr. Sylvester. You will be going away soon?’

He shook his head gravely.

‘I fear not for long. I may have a week’s cruise with my brother-in-law—you know, he has a yacht for the summer—but my labours are only beginning. I have the elections in view. You agree with me, no doubt, Lady Garnett, that the Government is bound to go to the country

in the autumn ; you know, of course, that I am thinking of standing for ——.’

‘I congratulate you in advance, Mr. Sylvester ! I am sure you will get in, especially if you have your sister down to canvass.’

‘I am afraid Eve is not sufficiently interested in politics to be of much assistance,’ said the candidate. Then he went on, a little nervously, pulling at his collar : ‘You will wish me success, Miss Masters ?’

‘Oh yes !’ said the girl hastily ; ‘I am sure we both wish you that, Mr. Sylvester. We shall be most interested, shall we not, Aunt Marcelle ?’

Lady Garnett came to her assistance with smiling promptitude.

‘Of course, Mr. Sylvester ; we will even wear your colours, if they are becoming, you know ; and I am sure you would not fight under any others. And, mind, we will have no reforms—unless you like to try your hand on the climate. But nothing else ! You are so fond of reforming, you

English—even the most Conservative of you—that I live in constant fear of being reformed away. I hope, Mr. Sylvester, you are more Conservative than that.’

Charles Sylvester flushed a little; he cleared his throat elaborately before he replied :

‘I fear I have failed to make myself understood, Lady Garnett; in no sense do I call myself a Conservative, though I am prepared to vote with the party on the Irish Question. I am a Liberal Unionist, Lady Garnett. I may almost call myself a Radical Unionist. My views on the emancipation of labour, for instance, are quite advanced. I am prepared——’

Mary interrupted him, absently, demurely, with a little speech that appeared to be a quotation.

‘Labour is a pretty beast in its cage to the philanthropic visitor with buns; its temper is better understood of the professional keeper.’

Lady Garnett arched her eyebrows

pensively ; Charles looked surprised, displeased ; Mary hastened to explain, blushing a little :

‘I beg your pardon ! the phrase is Mr. Rainham’s. I believe it is the only political principle he has.’

Charles’ displeasure at the maxim cooled to lofty disdain of its author.

‘Ah, yes !—pretty, but cynical, as I should say most of Mr. Rainham’s principles were.’

Lady Garnett was aroused out of her state of vacant boredom for the first time into a certain interest. Mary sat, her hands clasped in her lap, the flush just dying away out of her pale cheeks, while Mr. Sylvester embarked upon an elaborate disquisition of his principles and his programme—it might have been an expansion of his Parliamentary address—which the elder lady, whom a chance phrase had started upon a new line of thought, scarcely considered.

‘Does he know?’ she asked herself.

‘Has this rather stupid young man grown suddenly acute enough to be jealous?’ Certainly there had been a flash, a trace of curious rancour in his brief mention of Rainham’s name, for which it was scarcely easy to account. That the two men, in spite of their long juxtaposition, had never been more than acquaintances, had never been in the least degree friends, she was perfectly well aware; it was not in the nature of either of them to be more intimately allied.

Rainham’s indolent humour and fantastic melancholy, his genial disregard of popularity or success, could not but be displeasing to a man so precise and practical as the barrister. Only now she had scented, had dimly perceived beneath his speech, something more than the indefinable aversion of incompatible tempers, a very personal and present dislike. Had things passed between them, things of which she was ignorant? Was the sentiment, then, reciprocal? She hardly believed

it: Rainham's placid temper gave to his largest hostilities the character merely of languid contempt; it was not worth the trouble to hate anyone, he had said to her so often—neither to hate nor to love. She could imagine him with infidelities on occasion to the last part of his rule; yes, she could imagine that—but for hatred, no! he had said rightly he was too indolent for that. It must be all on one side, then, as happens so frequently in life with love and hate, and the rest—all on one side. And the barrister had risen to take his leave before her reflections had brought her further than this.

CHAPTER XX.

IT must be admitted that when Lady Garnett insinuated, for the benefit of her half-incredulous inward counsellor, that Charles Sylvester, in spite of his almost aggressive panoply of self-assurance, had been smitten by the fever of jealousy, she fully sustained her reputation for perspicacity. Her conclusions were seldom wrong, and, indeed, the barrister, although he had professional motives for endeavouring to cloak himself with something of the wisdom of the serpent, was characterized far more by the somewhat stolid innocence of that proverbially moral, but less interesting creature, the dove; and it was an easy task for a keen observer, such as her

ladyship undoubtedly was, to read him line upon line, like the most clearly printed of books. As in the case of a book, what one read was not always intelligible, and it might even on occasion be necessary to read between the obvious lines; but in this particular instance the page contained no cryptogram, and the astute old lady had read it without her spectacles.

Charles was jealous; he had not insulted himself by admitting it even for an instant, but he was jealous; and his jealousy was more than the roving fever of all lovers, in that it had a definite, tangible object.

It would have been contrary to his nature to allow either his love or the ensuing passion to interfere in any way with his professional duties or instincts; he was a lawyer, and an embryo Member of Parliament first, a man afterwards; and it was not until late in the afternoon of the day which followed his last recorded

interview with Lady Garnett and her niece that he dismissed from his brain the complexities of 'Brown and another *versus* Johnson,' and drew from an orderly mental pigeon-hole the bundle of papers bearing the neat endorsement, '*Re* Miss Masters.' When, to the ecstatic joy of his clerk, he had withdrawn himself from his chambers in Paper Buildings, and was walking briskly along the dusty Embankment in the direction of his club, he found himself, by a sequence which was natural, though he would have been the last to own it, already thinking of Rainham, and wondering, with a trace of dignified self-reproach, whether he had not been guilty of some remissness in the performance of his duty towards society, in the matter of that reprehensible individual and his aberrations from the paths of virtue. He did not stop to question himself too strictly as to the connection between his matrimonial aspirations and Rainham's peccadilloes; but he was able to assure himself that the

assertion of his principles demanded a closer investigation, a more crucial analysis of certain ambiguous episodes.

‘Supposing,’ he argued, ‘supposing Rainham had given signs of a desire to marry my sister, or my cousin, or any other girl in whom I was interested, or, in short, whom I knew, it would obviously have been my duty, before giving my consent or approval, to find out all about his relations with that girl, that person whom I saw with him in the park—ah, yes! Kitty, that was her name. And, in a way, don’t I owe far more to society in general than I do to any of my immediate friends in particular? Well, then, I ought to know more about Kitty, so as to be prepared in case—that is, for emergencies. . . . Why, for all I know, I may have been suspecting Rainham all this time quite unjustly. I’m sure I hope so.’ Here he shook his head sorrowfully. ‘But I’m afraid there’s not much chance of that. The question remains, how am I

to find out anything? It's no good asking Rainham; that goes without saying. It would be equally useless to try Lightmark: they're as thick as thieves, and he's not the sort of man to be pumped very easily. And yet, if Rainham's friends are out of the question, what's to be done? He hasn't got any enemies—that sort of man never has, except himself. How can I get hold of the girl? I suppose some people would set a detective to watch Rainham, and so on; but that's not to be thought of, in this case.' He stopped close to Cleopatra's Needle, and frowned abstractedly over the stone parapet, absently following the struggles of a boy who was laboriously working a great empty lighter across the wide, smoke-coloured river at a narrow angle with the shore. An idea suggested itself in flattering colours for a moment: he might pay a visit to the little restaurant or club in Turk Street, the shady place with a foreign name which he had forgotten. At the

expense of a little tact, he might very probably succeed in inducing some of the careless, disreputable young artists who formed the frequentation of the place to talk about Rainham's amours. It even occurred to him that at a late hour Kitty herself might be seen there, dancing a can-can with Rainham, or singing songs with a riotous chorus. But in spite of this prospect, the notion was not sufficiently attractive. He had not enjoyed his introduction to the eccentric fraternity, on the occasion when he had been fired by Lightmark's early enthusiasm about the place to request to take him there to dine. He had felt, almost as much as the men to whom he was introduced, that he had no business there, that he was an outsider; he had even been snubbed. 'And, after all,' he said impatiently, resuming his homeward direction, 'though I've got enough evidence to damn him twice over in the eyes of any man in the world, I suppose it wouldn't be enough to convince

a woman, if she believed in him. I must get hold of Kitty—it's the only way to arrive at a certainty.'

After much deliberation to the same effect, he determined, somewhat reluctantly, that there was nothing for it but to endeavour to enlist the sympathies of one of Rainham's more intimate friends. He had recurred by this time to the unstable hypothesis that he was acting primarily in Rainham's interest, that his real motive was to arrive at the truth on the chance that it might be favourable to his unadmitted rival. It only remained for him to select out of the limited material at his disposal the man whom he should invite to enter upon this alliance. And when he reached the gloomy library of the eminently respectable club where he was accustomed, before dining, to study the evening papers and to write his letters, the choice had been made; and after one or two abortive efforts, he composed to his satisfaction a diplomatic epistle, which he

addressed to Oswyn (with whom he enjoyed a nodding acquaintance) at the restaurant in Turk Street.

Late in the afternoon of the next day Sylvester sat alone and expectant before a pile of temporarily neglected papers, telling himself that Rainham ought to be very grateful for these strenuous efforts in the interests of his injured reputation. He was beginning to wonder nervously whether Oswyn would fail him, when he heard a knock at the outer door, followed by an unfamiliar step, and the clerk announced that a gentleman wished to see him by appointment on private business. The barrister rose from his seat with a portentous display of polite, awkward cordiality, and motioned his guest into a chair.

‘It’s extremely good of you to take the trouble to come,’ he said tentatively.

‘That depends upon what you want of me,’ answered Oswyn shrewdly. ‘You said in your note that it was on a matter

of vital importance to a friend of mine. I haven't so many friends that I can afford to shirk a little trouble in a matter which vitally concerns one of them. May I ask, in the first place, who is the friend ?'

Sylvester picked up the open brief which lay before him on the table and folded it scrupulously.

'Philip Rainham,' he answered, and then shot a quick glance at Oswyn.

'Rainham?' echoed the other with an air suggestive at once of surprise and relief, as if, perhaps, he had been expecting to hear another name. 'You are right, he is a friend,' he added simply. 'What can I do for him ?'

'Well, the fact is, I'm afraid he's got into difficulties—a scrape, an imbroglio, with a woman!'

The painter lifted his expressive eyebrows incredulously.

'Since I last saw him—three days ago ?'

'Oh dear no ; the thing's been going

on, I should say, for quite a long time—more than a year, to my knowledge.’

Oswyn reflected for a moment, gazing at Sylvester with some suspicion.

‘I don’t think it troubles him much,’ he said brusquely. ‘Is it any business of mine—or of yours? Has he spoken to you about it?’

Sylvester uttered a hasty negative.

‘Oh no! He is not the sort of man who would. But other people talk. You see, I’m afraid there’s some sort of blackmail going on, and he oughtn’t to submit to it. His friends oughtn’t to allow it. If—if one could see the woman and frighten her a little——’

‘Is that what you wanted me for?’ asked Oswyn impatiently. ‘If so, allow me——’

The other hastened to reassure him.

‘Oh no, not at all. But I thought you might be able to tell me where the person is to be found, her address, or something about her. I understand that she was a model; you probably know her. . . .’

The painter shrugged his shoulders.

‘Who is she? What is her name?’

‘Kitty—that’s all I know.’

‘Kitty? Kitty Crichton, I suppose.’

A light dawned on him; the name opened a door to many forgotten trivial incidents. He did not speak again for a minute, and when he broke the silence there was a harder tone in his voice, and he rose from his chair at the same time.

‘I don’t see how this can concern me, or you, either. You must pardon me if I say that I dislike meddling, and people who meddle.’

Sylvester blushed hotly.

‘You don’t suppose I want to do him anything but good,’ he said diplomatically, trying to convince himself that he was not damaging the reputation for perfect candour which he hoped that he enjoyed. ‘It’s not a pleasant task, but there are circumstances in which one has to sacrifice one’s scruples—one’s feelings.’

Oswyn glanced at him again, with some contempt in the lines of his worn face.

‘Excuse me if I refrain from sounding your motives.’

Then he paused, fingering his soft felt hat. Suddenly his face was illumined by a remarkably grim smile, and it became evident to the man who was watching him so anxiously that there had occurred some change in his mental perspective.

‘I don’t quite understand why you brought me into this,’ he added, the smile still hovering very lightly on his lips. ‘However, under the circumstances, I think I can’t do much harm by putting you in the way of finding Mrs. Crichton. Let me recommend you to inquire for her at the office of the *Outcry*, the newspaper—she used to work for it, I believe—in Took’s Court. They will know her address there. Took’s Court—it’s only a few minutes’ walk from here. Thanks, I can find my way out. . . .’

‘I suppose that was rather a stupid

thing to do,' he said regretfully, as he stopped in the doorway below to light a cigarette, 'though not such a *bêtise* as his, *mon Dieu!* . . . But I couldn't resist the temptation. Now, I wonder if he's clever enough to find out the truth?'

CHAPTER XXI.

THE night was dark and still—so dark that above the tree-tops all was a soft, abysmal blank ; so still that the Japanese lanterns scarcely swung on their strings among the apple-trees, and the leaves almost forgot to rustle. From the tent in the corner of the little garden (little, but large for a garden in London) the quaint, rapturous music of the Hungarian band floated in fitful extravagance, now wildly dominating, now graciously accompanying the murmur of many voices, the mingled pace of feet, and the lingering sweep of silken skirts upon the shadowed grass. The light streamed in broad, electric rays from the open windows of the low, wide

house, and from the tall double doors of the studio, which had been added at the side, broken continually by the silhouettes of guests who entered the rooms or sought the cooler air outside, and dulling to the quiet glow of old stained glass the rich radiance of the fantastic coloured lanterns.

It was one of the series of summer evenings on which, according to the cards which had been so widely circulated, Mr. and Mrs. Lightmark were 'at home' to their friends, and to their friends' friends; and Rainham, who was a late arrival at the elaborate house in Grove Road, was able after a time to recognise many familiar faces, some of them almost forgotten, among those who had elected to be present. The rooms, in spite of the outlet afforded by the garden, were all surprisingly full; and after a hurried exchange of greetings, which Eve's duties as hostess had compelled her to curtail, he had passed through a jungle of brilliant

toilettes and unfamiliar figures into the newly-built bright studio, where he had been told that he would find his friend. He had abundant leisure to corroborate the first impression of a splendour for which he was hardly prepared, which had seized him when he entered the hall and surrendered his coat to a courteous servant in livery, before Lightmark, radiant and flushed with success, singled him out in the corner to which he had retreated in loneliness.

‘ So glad to see you, old man! we were hoping you would turn up. Better late than never. Isn’t it a crush? I assure you our evenings are becoming quite an institution. You will find scores of people you know here. Excuse my leaving you. Not much like the old studio days, eh? Afternoon tea with Copal’s cups and saucers, and Mrs. Thingumy’s tea-cakes. Your friend Lady Garnett is here somewhere—I’ll be shot if I know where. Try the garden; you can get out this way. See you again later.’

‘All right, Dick,’ he answered with equanimity, smiling with a little inward amusement ; ‘ you look after your people. I will find my way about.’

As he made his way discreetly among the little groups of people who strolled processionally along the gravel walks and beneath the trees, or disposed themselves in basket chairs upon the lawn, feeling himself vaguely exhilarated by the not too abstruse music of the posturing fiddlers, his eyes caressed by the soft glow of the Japanese lanterns, strung like antique jewelled necklets against the almost tangible blackness of the night, he found himself listening with a half-malicious amusement to the commonplace of the conversational formulæ affected by the young world of society, the well-worn, patched-up questions, the anticipated answers. It was very little changed since the time when he had not yet emancipated himself from the dreary bondage of such functions. It was croquet then, lawn-

tennis now; for the rest only the names were different. Presently he encountered McAllister, a solitary wanderer like himself, and they found themselves seats before long in the darkest corner of the garden, where a few chairs had been placed, outside the radius of the lanterns, underneath a weeping willow.

‘And they say painting doesn’t pay, said the Scotchman, extending his long hands comprehensively, with a quiet chuckle. ‘And I’m not saying that it does, mind you, when a man has notions like that queer, cantankerous devil Oswyn. He wouldn’t make anything pay in this world. But if a man’s clever and canny, and has the sense to see on which side his bread’s buttered . . . why, it’s just easier than nothing. And to think that the laddie isn’t even an Associate.’

‘Yes. I suppose he’s getting on pretty well,’ suggested Rainham, with a lazy enjoyment of this frank worldliness.

‘Getting on! Doesn’t it look like it?’

Isn't he entertaining his friends like—like a Rothschild? You know, of course, that he has sold his Academy picture, and next year's as well—and four figures for each of them?'

'Yes; and he's commissioned to paint a life-size portrait of the Hereditary Grand-Duchess of Oberschnitzelsteinwurst—an undertaking, by the way, for which I don't envy him. Oh, Dick's all right! What have you got in the Academy this year, by the way? I'm ashamed to say I haven't been there yet.'

'You haven't! But you have seen Lightmark's picture? No? Well, it's a fine thing, and just as clever as—— But, mind you, I'm not prepared to say that Oswyn wouldn't have made something better out of it.'

'Yes,' said Rainham slowly, with the chill of the old misgiving about his heart, as he remembered the stormy encounter at the dock, with the haunting shadow of doubt in his mind, laboriously dismissed as

an offence against his loyalty. 'It seems to me that Oswyn has more real genius in his little finger than Dick has in his whole body; I am sure of it. It was a pity that they should both have chosen the same subject, especially as their ideas, as to colour and treatment and so on, are so much the same. But, of course, Dick had a perfect right to finish and exhibit his picture, even if he knew that Oswyn was thinking of the same thing.'

McAllister assented hastily.

'No doubt, no doubt; though Oswyn was just wild about it—you know his uncivilized ways—and I must admit I was a bit astonished myself, at first, when I saw the picture at Burlington House with Lightmark's signature to it. But then I didn't know anything of the rights of the case. He's a queer, cantankerous devil, and he's always being wronged, according to his own accounts, and not only by the critics. No one pays much attention to what he says nowadays. It's just that

absinthe and the cigarettes that are the ruin of him, day and night. Poor devil! why can't he stick to whisky and a pipe, like a decent Christian ?'

'His queerness is all on the surface,' said Rainham gravely. 'You have to dig pretty deep to find out what he's really worth.'

Just then Eve hurried towards them through the trees, looking about her with an air of hesitation, carrying the train of her pale-gray brocade dress over one bare girlish arm.

'Is that you, Mr. McAllister?' she asked, recognising first in the darkness the gaunt figure and tawny beard of the Scotchman. 'Oh, and Mr. Rainham too! This is really very wrong of you, monopolizing each other in this way. And don't you know,' she added laughingly, 'that this corner is especially dedicated to flirtations? You must really come and do your duty. Mr. McAllister, won't you take Miss Menzies in to have some supper? You know her, I think—a

compatriot, isn't she? You will find her close to the tent. And you,' she pursued, turning to Rainham, 'you must take someone in, you know. Will you come this way, please, and I will introduce you to somebody. I am so sorry I was not at home when you called the other day,' she said conventionally, as they edged their way by degrees towards the house.

'Yes; I seem to have an unfortunate capacity for missing you nowadays. At Bordighera, for instance. I have certainly had no luck at all lately. I haven't even had an opportunity of telling you how charming I find your house.'

'Ah!' said Eve vaguely, her eyes wandering over the people who were grouped upon the gravel walk and under the veranda outside the windows of the supper-room, 'we really seem to see nothing of you now. Oh, let me introduce you to Mrs. Gibson—Mrs. Everett P. Gibson. She's American; you'll find her very amusing.'

Rainham followed her obediently, think-

ing, with a quickly repressed passion of regret, of the child who would have confided to him her latest impressions of sorrow, of joy; finding something, which hardly emanated from himself, which made it seem difficult for him to gather up the threads of the old charming intimacy with this new Eve—this woman with her pretty, dignified bearing and self-possessed, almost cold attitude. The introduction was duly effected, and for the next half-hour Rainham devoted himself heroically to the mental and physical entertainment (he was not obliged to do much talking) of the American lady, who hailed from the Far West, and lectured him volubly, with an exorbitant accent and a monotony of delivery which began to tell on his nerves to an alarming degree, on her impressions of Europe, and especially England; the immense superiority of gas as a cooking and heating agent; the phenomenal attainments of her children, and the antiquities of Minneapolis.

After supper he found himself listening to the band in the garden with a sentimental young lady, who made him fully conversant with her adoration of moonlit nights, waltzing, the latest tenor, and the scenery of Switzerland.

It was already growing late, and people had begun to leave, when it struck him that, through no active fault of his own, other than a certain complaisant indolence, he had as yet exchanged only the briefest of greetings with Lady Garnett, while of Miss Masters only a glimpse had been vouchsafed to him, at the further end of the crowded supper-room. He wandered into the studio, where a little intimate party had assembled around an easel, and he was fortunate enough in a few minutes to find himself invited to take possession of a vacant seat precisely by Mary's side.

'Oh, you wicked person!' said Mary reproachfully. 'Why do you never come to see us? and where have you been hiding yourself all the evening?'

Rainham laughed gently.

‘I feel rather guilty, I own; but you know there is an execrable proverb which says, “Duty first, and pleasure afterwards.” I have been living up to it, that’s all. If you only knew how I have been longing to talk to somebody who wouldn’t ask me whether the music didn’t fill me with a passionate desire to dance! And how good it is to be with a person who doesn’t ask you whether you play much lawn-tennis, or whether you prefer London to the country on the whole. Ah, Mary! I consider myself a model of self-denial; but I am rewarded now.’

‘That’s rather pretty for you,’ answered the girl approvingly; ‘and you are forgiven, though you have still to make your peace with Aunt Marcelle. Tell me what you have been doing, what you have been reading. . . .’

The conversation drifted on, now and again becoming general, and including the rest of the circle, but always recurring and

narrowing into the deeper stream of their old intimacy.

‘You are the only really satisfactory people I know,’ he said presently—‘the only people who know how to enjoy life, so far as it is to be enjoyed.’

‘You mustn’t give me any credit for it ; it’s all Aunt Marcelle’s doing. But I don’t think I know what you mean exactly. Perhaps we oughtn’t to feel flattered?’

‘I mean, you are the only people who understand that happiness doesn’t depend on what one does or doesn’t do—that it all depends on the point of view.’

‘The way of looking at life generally?’ she hazarded.

‘Precisely. True philosophy only admits one point of view—from outside. Aren’t we always being told that life is only a play? Well, we clever people are the spectators, the audience. We look at the play from a comfortable seat in the stalls ; and when the curtain drops at the end, we go home quietly and—sleep.’

Mary looked at him for a moment silently.

‘I’m not at all sure that we ought to feel flattered! You consider that you and I and her ladyship are spectators, then. Isn’t it very selfish?’

‘More or less. Of course, it’s impossible to do the thing thoroughly without being absolutely selfish—a hermit, in fact. I sometimes think I was intended for a hermit.’

Mary sighed covertly, though the smile still lingered in her brown eyes.

‘I’m afraid I only take a kind of sideways view of things. I should like to—to——’

‘To go up in a kind of moral balloon,’ suggested Rainham laughingly, ‘and get a bird’s-eye view of life?’

‘Exactly; and drift about. Only then one would never get really interested in anything or anybody. I should want someone else in the balloon.’

‘You must take me,’ said Rainham, still smiling.

Mary looked at him quickly, and then turned away, shivering a little.

‘What nonsense we are talking!’ she said suddenly. ‘And I’m afraid it isn’t even original nonsense. We don’t really want to be selfish, and we’re not; you needn’t pretend you are. And isn’t it getting very, very late? Don’t you think Mrs. Lightmark looks as if we ought to go? I don’t mean that she looks inhospitable. But isn’t she rather pale and tired? This sort of thing doesn’t seem to suit her as well as her husband. Yes, I must really go.’

When Miss Masters had deserted him, after extracting a promise that he would take an early opportunity of paying his over-due respects to her aunt, and had gone with Mrs. Lightmark in search of the old lady, Rainham made his adieux, leaving Lightmark still radiant, and protesting hospitably against such early hours; and as he walked homewards, with a cigar unlighted between his lips, he

smiled rather bitterly, as he thought how little he was able to adhere to the tenets of his philosophy. Why else should he regret so much and so often the act which had been rung down when . . . And how many more acts and scenes were there to be ?

‘Well, I suppose one must stay to the end,’ he said finally. ‘One isn’t obliged to sit it out, but the audience are requested to keep their seats until the fall of the curtain. Yes, leaving early disturbs the other spectators.’

While Lady Garnett was being wrapped up with the attention due to her years and dignity, Mary and Eve sat talking in the hall, a square, wainscoted little room, hung with pale grass matting, and decorated brightly with quaint Breton faience and old brass sconces.

‘I was so glad to see Philip here to-night,’ Mary was saying, while Eve fastened for her the clasp of a refractory bracelet. ‘We were afraid he was be-

coming quite a recluse, and that must be so bad for him !

‘ Almost as bad as too much society.’

‘ Yes ; it’s only another form of dissipation.’

‘ I’m not sure that it isn’t better to have too much of other people’s society than too much of one’s own.’

‘ I don’t think I ever regarded him from a—a society point of view. You know what I mean—like Colonel Lightmark, for instance. When I was a child I always thought of him as a sort of fairy god-mother — a person who was always dropping from the clouds to take one for drives in the country, or with a box for the pantomime.’

Eve laughed at herself, and then sighed. Mary looked at her curiously for a moment, finding something cold, a trace of weariness or disdain in the clear voice and the pretty, childish face.

‘ Philip was always like that, the kindest—— He has always been quite a

hero for me—a kind of Colonel Newcome.’ Then she broke off rather suddenly, finding Eve in turn looking at her inquiringly. ‘Isn’t it curious that we should both have known him so long without knowing each other?’

‘I suppose it was because we all lived so much abroad. And I don’t think Philip talks about his friends very much. . . .’

Lady Garnett interrupted the *tête-à-tête* conversation at this point, and when her little brougham had rolled away, and a few other late guests had left Eve alone with her husband, she sat for a few minutes in the deserted drawing - room, among a wilderness of empty chairs, meditating, with her chin resting on one hand, and her eyes absently contemplating the scattered petals of a copper-coloured rose, which had fallen from some dress or bouquet upon one of the Oriental rugs which partly covered the parquet floor.

‘Dick,’ she said presently to her

husband, who was leaning against the rails of the veranda, lazily enjoying a final cigarette, 'did it ever strike you that Philip Rainham was in love with anybody?'

Lightmark turned and gazed at her through the open window wonderingly, almost suspiciously, and then broke into a laugh.

'Or that anyone was in love with him?' she pursued gravely.

'I don't think I ever noticed it,' he answered, with another display of mirth. 'What have you discovered now, little matchmaker?'

'Not much. I was only thinking. . . . What a pity Charles wasn't here to-night!'

'Oh, you little enigma! Is it that dear Charles who is to be pitied, or who? We, for instance?'

But Eve assumed a superior air, and Lightmark, who hated riddles, dismissed the subject and the end of his cigarette simultaneously.

CHAPTER XXII.

ONE afternoon, three months later, Rainham, finding himself in the neighbourhood of Parton Street, took the occasion of knocking at Lady Garnett's door, and found, somewhat to his surprise, that the two ladies were returned. Introduced into their presence—they were sitting in the library, in close proximity to a considerable fire—he learnt that their summer wanderings that year had been of no extensive nature, and that they had come into residence a week ago.

They had spent a month in a country house in Berkshire, the old lady told him presently, adding, with an explanatory grimace, that it was a house which be-

longed to a relation—the sort of place where one had to visit now and again; where a month went a very long way; where one had to draw largely on one's courtesy—on one's hypocrisy (if he preferred the word), not to throw up the cards at once, and retire after the first week.

Rainham gathered from her resigned animadversions that the relations must be by marriage only: there was no Gallic quality in the atmosphere she described.

It was a very nice house—Jacobean, she believed—or, rather, it would have been nice if they had had it to themselves. Unfortunately it was very full: there were a great many stupid men who shot all day, and as many stupid women who talked scandal and went to sleep after dinner; also there were several pairs—or did one say 'brace'?—of young people who flirted, but they lived in the conservatories. When one did not go to sleep after dinner, one played round games, or baccarat. She

herself had refused to play, although they had wished to make her; personally, she preferred to go to sleep or to listen to Mary's music. Yes, Mary was more fortunate: they had a very good piano and an organ. Mary's music was a great success, although her admirers were apt to confuse Offenbach with Chopin; and some of the women appeared to think it was not quite ladylike to play so well, with such a professional manner. Still, Mary's music was a success, and that was more than could be said of her own conversation. That had been a distinct failure! They seemed to think she wished to make fun of things—of sacred things, the game laws, and agriculture, and the Established Church. Of course, she had no such intention: it was only that she wished for information, for instruction in these difficult national institutions, which, long as she had made her home in England, she feared she would never thoroughly comprehend.

Mary had sat silently, with her hands

clasped across her knees, while her aunt placidly poured forth these and similar comments (which were interspersed by questions and sympathetic monosyllables from Rainham), not so much acrimoniously, as in the tone of the humorous reporter, who is too indifferent to be actuated by a sense of injury.

The girl struck him as having grown tired and listless—more listless than a merely physical fatigue would warrant. He interrupted now to ask her with a touch of compassion if she too had been very much bored.

Her fine eyes were averted as she answered him, smiling a little :

‘ I am rather glad to be back. It was a pretty place, and the gardens were charming, when it did not rain.’

Lady Garnett was overheard to murmur into the black ear of Mefistofele that it always rained.

‘ But on the whole—yes, I was rather bored,’ the girl continued abruptly.

‘The rain and the round games and the people?’ Rainham echoed. ‘You have my sympathy.’

‘I believe I rather liked the round games,’ said Mary, with a little laugh. ‘They were less tiresome than the rest; and the organ was a great solace; it was very perfect.’

‘Ah, yes, she liked the round games,’ put in Lady Garnett; ‘and if two of her admirers had played them more, and turned over her music less, the organ might have been a greater solace.’

‘They were very foolish,’ sighed the girl rather wearily.

‘Mr. Sylvester was there for the last fortnight,’ continued Lady Garnett with some malice. ‘He succeeded Lord Overstock as Mary’s musical acolyte. In revenge, Lord Overstock wished to teach her baccarat, and Mr. Sylvester remonstrated. It was sublime! It was the one moment of amusement vouchsafed me.’

Mary flushed, locking her hands

together nervously, with a trace of passion.

‘It was ridiculous! intolerable! He had no right——!’

Lady Garnett bent forward, taking her hand.

‘Forgive me, *chérie!* I did not mean to annoy you. . . . You can imagine how glad we were to see you,’ she added, with a sudden turn to Rainham. ‘It was charming of you to call so soon; you could hardly have expected to find us.’

‘You must not give me too much credit. I happened to be quite near, in Harley Street. I could not pass without inquiring.’

‘Ah, well,’ she said, ‘since you are here——’

She was looking absently away from him into an antique silver basket which lay on the little table by her side, in which were miscellaneous trifles, odd pieces of lace, thimbles which she never used, a broken fan, a box of chocolates.

‘Mary, my dear,’ she said quickly, ‘I am so stupid! The old *bonbonnière*, with the brilliants? I must have left it on my dressing-table, or somewhere. That new housemaid—we really know nothing about her—it would be such a temptation. Would you mind——’

‘Is this——’ Rainham began, and stopped short.

Lady Garnett’s brilliant eyes, and a little admonitory gesture of one hand, restrained him. When the girl had shut the door behind her, the elder lady turned to him with a quaint smile.

‘Is that it? Of course it is, my friend. You are singularly obtuse: a woman would have seen through me at once.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Rainham, somewhat mystified. ‘You mean it was a pretext?’

‘It was for you that I made it,’ she replied with dignity. ‘What was it you came to say?’

The other was silent for a moment,

cogitating. When he looked up at last, meeting her eyes, it was with something like a shiver, in a tone of genuine dismay, that he remarked :

‘Dear lady, there are times when you terrify me. You see too much. It is not—no, it is not human. I had meant to tell you nothing.’

He stopped short, lowering his voice, and looking from the depths of his low chair into the red fire.

‘It is not necessary, Philip,’ she continued presently, ‘that you should tell me ; only, if you will be so secret, you should wear smoked glasses. Your eyes were so speaking that I was afraid—yes, afraid—when you came into the room. They looked haunted ; they had the air of having seen a ghost !’

‘It was a very respectable ghost,’ he said grimly, ‘with a frock-coat and a bald head. You know Sir Egbert, I suppose ?’

‘Only by name. I imagined that he was your spectre, when you spoke of

Harley Street. Does he send you South again ?'

'No,' said Rainham shortly ; 'he thinks it would be inexpedient—that was his phrase, inexpedient—in a hotel, you know, and all that. . . . I was obliged to him, because in any case it would have been inconvenient to me to be abroad this year. I suppose, though, that if it would have done me any good I should have gone ; but I have a great deal to arrange.'

He went on composedly to tell her of the most important of these arrangements—the disposal of his business. He had systematically neglected it for years, he explained, and it had ended by going to the dogs. So long as his foreman was there, that had not mattered so much ; but Bullen had decided to desert him, and very wisely. He had accepted an offer to manage the works of a firm of North-Country ship-builders ; he was to shake the dust of Blackpool from off his feet in a very few months, and would probably make his

fortune. And as he himself was not equal to bearing his incubus alone, he had put it in the market. A brand new company had bought it—that is to say, they had made him an offer—a ridiculously inadequate one, he was told, but which he was determined to accept; at any rate, it would leave him enough, when everything was paid, to live upon for the rest of his life. The legal preliminaries were now being settled: they appeared to be interminable; but as in the meantime the dock-gates were shut, and the clerks had departed, he could not, so far as he saw, be losing money; that was a consolation.

He had not come to the end of his disquisition before he discovered that he spoke to deaf ears. The old lady for once was inattentive: she had sat screening her face from the fire with a large palm fan while he unburdened himself, and she began now with a certain hesitation:

‘ My pretext, Philip! When I said that I made it for you it was only half true. In

effect, my dear, I had something to tell you—something disagreeable.'

'Concerning me?' he asked.

'Certainly,' she said—'something I have heard.'

He looked vaguely across at her, finding her obscurity a little strained, waiting for her to speak. The silence that intervened was beginning to harass him, when she said suddenly :

'I will be quite plain. I think you ought to know. There is a scandal abroad about you—about you and some woman.'

'Some woman!' he repeated blankly. 'What woman?' He leant back in his chair, laughing his pleasant, low laugh. 'I am sorry,' he said, 'I can't be as seriously annoyed as I ought; it is too foolish. My conscience really does not help me to discover her—this woman. Do you know any more?'

She shook her head.

'It is not a nice story,' she said. 'No,

I have heard no name ; only the story is current. I have heard it from three sources. I thought you had better know of it.'

'Thank you,' he answered, rising to go. 'Yes, it is a thing one may as well know. It is very kind of them, these people, to take such trouble, to be sufficiently interested. Upon my honour, I do not know that I very much care. After all, what does it matter?'

'Nothing to me,' said Lady Garnett, with a little shrug of disdain—'nothing, *Dieu me pardonne !* even if it were true.'

'Well, good-bye,' he said.

As he held her hand for a moment between his own he thought it trembled slightly.

'Ah, no!' she said quickly ; 'it is a phrase I decline. Come and see me soon. I am an old woman, my friend, and I have outlived my generation. I have said too many good-byes in my time. It is *au revoir*.'

‘With all my heart,’ he said, smiling.
‘*Au revoir.*’

Her quaint intimation—that was the manner in which he characterized it—was already dismissed from his mind when he emerged into the street.

He had too many graver preoccupations to be greatly troubled by this grotesque slander. Going on his way, however—a temporary cessation of the soft, persistent rain which had been falling for most of the day suggested a walk—a chance recollection brought him to a sudden stop, changing his indifference for a moment into the shadow of pale indignation. How dull of him not to have guessed at once! it must be that unfortunate girl Kitty Crichton with whom busybodies were associating his name. He wondered how they had discovered her, and by whom the stupid story had been set afloat. The baselessness of the scandal, conjoined with his immense apathy just then as to anything more

that the malice of men could do, inclined him to amusement, the more so as he reflected how many months it was since the girl and her wretched history had passed from his ken. He had found her gone on his return from Italy in the spring, leaving no address and but the briefest acknowledgment of his good-will in a note, which stated that she had no longer any excuse for imposing on his kindness—had found friends. The letter closed, as he imagined, a painful history, which, since his service had been, after all, so fruitless, he could see ended with relief. To his interpretation, the girl had recovered her scoundrel journalist, or at least compelled him to contribute to her support; and after all, as it seemed, he had not done with her yet, though the fashion of her return was ghostly and immaterial enough. The subject galled him; there were always dim possibilities lurking in the background of it which he refused to contemplate; he dismissed it. His medi-

tation had carried him through the bustle of Oxford Street to the Marble Arch, and, the weather still encouraging him, he decided to turn into the Park. Many rainy days had made the air exceedingly soft, and in his enjoyment of this unusual quality, and of the strangely sweet odour of the wet earth and mildewing leaves, he forgot for awhile a certain momentous sentence of Sir Egbert Rome's which had jingled in his head all that afternoon. Presently it tripped him up again, like the gross melody of a music-hall song, and caused him to drop absently upon the first seat, quite unconscious that it was in an unwholesome condition of moisture. He had turned his back on the brilliant patches of yellow and copper-coloured chrysanthemums on the flower-plots facing Park Lane, and he looked westwards over a wider expanse of grass and trees: the grass bestrewed with bright autumnal leaves, the trees obscured and formless, in a rising white mist, through which a pale

sun struggled and was vanquished. He had never been in a fitter mood to appreciate the decay of the year, and suddenly he was seized, in the midst of his depression, with an immense thrill, almost causing him to throw out his arms with an embracing gesture to the autumn, the very personal charm, the mysterious and pitiful fascination of the season whose visible beauty seems to include all spiritual things. It cast a spell over him of a long mental silence, as one might say, in which all definite thought expired, from which he aroused himself at last with a shrug of self-contempt, to find inexplicable tears in his eyes. And just then an interruption came, not altogether unwelcome, in the greeting of a familiar voice. It was Lightmark, who had discovered him in the course of a rapid walk down the Row, and had crossed over the small patch of intervening grass to make his salutations.

‘I knew you by your back,’ he remarked, after they had shaken hands—

‘the ineffable languor of it; and, besides, who else but you would sit for choice on an October evening in such a wretched place?’

He looked down ruefully at his patent leather shoes, which the damp grass had dulled.

Rainham smiled vaguely: he needed an effort to pull himself together, to collect his energies sufficiently to meet the commonplace of conversation, after the curious detachment into which he had fallen; and he wondered aimlessly how long he had been there.

‘I suppose, like everyone else, Dick,’ he remarked after awhile, ‘it is the weather which has brought you home at such an unfashionable date.’

‘Yes,’ answered Lightmark; ‘it was very poor fun yachting. I shall stay in town altogether next year, I think. And you—you are not looking particularly fit; what have you done with yourself?’

‘Oh, I am fit enough,’ said Rainham

lightly; 'I have been in London, you see.'

'Well, I can't let you go now you are here. Won't you dine with us? Or rather—no, I believe we dine out. Come back and have some tea; Eve will be enchanted. I really decline to sit in that puddle.'

Rainham rose slowly.

'Perhaps I will,' he said. 'I would have called before, if I had thought there was the least chance of finding you. And how do things go?'

As they strolled along through the deserted Park, and Lightmark entertained his friend with an extravagant narration of their miseries on the *Lucifer*, the chronic sea-sickness of the ladies, the incapacity and intoxication of the steward, and the discontent of everybody on board—he spoke as if they had entertained a considerable party—Rainham's interested eyes had leisure to note a change in him, not altogether unexpected. He presented

the same handsome, well-dressed, prosperous figure ; and yet prosperity had in some degree coarsened him. The old charm of his boyish carelessness had been succeeded by a certain hard assurance, an air of mundane, if not almost commercial shrewdness, which gave him less the note of an artist than of a successful man of business. And where the old Lightmark, the Lightmark of the Café Grecco days, broke out at times, it was less pleasantly than of old, in a curious recklessness, a tendency, which jarred on Rainham's susceptible nerves, to dilate with a vanity which would have been vulgar, had it not been almost childish, on his lavish living, the magnitude of his expenditure.

‘ You must find that sort of thing rather a tax ? ’ he asked tentatively, after a description which struck him as unnecessarily exuberant of a hospitality in the summer.

‘ Oh, it pays in the long-run, ’ remarked the other easily, ‘ to keep open house and

go everywhere. Thank heaven, the uncle is liberal! I admit we have been going at rather a pace lately. But, then, I can knock off a couple of pictures as soon as I have a little time, which will raise the wind again. I know what the public wants, bless it!

Rainham shrugged his shoulders rather wearily.

‘Poor public! If it wants art made in that spirit, it is worse than I believed.’

Lightmark looked askance at him, frowning a little, pulling at his long moustache. He was absorbed for some time—they had turned into the Edgware Road, and the soft rain had begun again—in ineffectual pursuit of cabs. When at last he had caught a driver’s eye and they had settled themselves on the cushions of a hansom, he turned abruptly to his companion to ask him if he had seen the Academy before it closed.

‘You recognised your domain?’ he asked lightly, when the other had re-

sponded in the affirmative — ‘in my picture, I mean?’

He spoke quickly, in his accustomed blithe habit : it might have been merely a morbid fancy of Rainham’s which traced a note of anxiety, of concealed uneasiness, in his accent, that the bare question scarcely justified.

Rainham paused a moment : it was not only a passing thought of Oswyn’s acrimony, and of the difficult minutes during which he had been thrown across Lightmark at the Dock, that constrained him ; it was rather the recollection of his own careful scrutiny of the disputed canvas, when he had at last dragged himself with a disagreeable sense of moral responsibility into Burlington House, and had come away at last strangely dissatisfied. Acquitting Dick of any conscious plagiarism, of a breach of common honesty, he was disagreeably filled with a sense of the work’s immeasurable inferiority to Oswyn’s ruined masterpiece. It was

clever, and audacious, and striking; it had had the fortune to be splendidly hung, and that was all, for all his goodwill, he could say. And since, after all, that was so little, would strike his friend as but a cold tribute after the panegyrics of the morning papers, he preferred to say nothing, deftly dropping the subject, and responding to the first half of his friend's question alone.

‘My domain, Dick? Ah, I forgot; you can hardly have heard that it is my domain no longer—or ceases to be very shortly. That has come to an end; I have sold it.’

Lightmark whistled softly.

‘Well, you surprise me! Of course I am glad; Eve will be glad too. We shall see more of you now, I suppose? or will you live abroad?’

‘Abroad?’ echoed Rainham absently. ‘Oh yes, very probably. But tell me, how is—Eve?’

‘As we seem to be arriving, I think I will let her tell you herself.’

They descended, and Rainham waited silently while his friend discharged the cabman, and let him in with his latchkey into the bright, spacious hall. Then, after glancing into the empty drawing-room, Lightmark preceded him up the thick carpeted stairs, on which their footsteps scarcely sounded, and stopped at the door of Eve's boudoir, through which a woman's voice, speaking rather rapidly, and, as it struck him, in a key of agitation, fell upon Rainham's ear with a certain familiarity, though he was sure it was not Eve's, and could not remember when or where he might have heard it. After a moment they went in.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THERE are occasions when thought is terribly and comprehensively sudden: the rudimentary processes of reasoning, by analogy and syllogism, so slow and so laborious, turn to divination. We have an occult vision, immediate and complete, into the obscure manner of life, and crowd an infinity of discovery into a very few seconds. It was so with Philip Rainham now. Lightmark had scarcely closed the door, against which he now stood in a black silence, with the air of a man turned to stone; Rainham's eyes had only fallen once upon the two figures on the sofa—Eve crushed in a corner, a sorrowful, dainty shape in the silk and lace of her

pretty tea-gown, with the white drawn face of a scared child; Kitty Crichton, in her cloak and hat, bending forward a little, the hectic flush of strong excitement colouring her cheeks, that were already branded by her malady—when he underwent a moral revolution. He had no more to learn. He glanced at Lightmark curiously, almost impartially, his loathing strangely tempered by a sort of self-contempt, that he should have been so deluded. The clumsy lies which this man had told him, and which he in his indolent charity had believed! All at once, and finally, in a flash of brutal illumination, he saw Lightmark, who had once been his friend, as he really was, naked and unclean. It stripped him of all his superficial qualities: the mask of genial good-nature, the air of good-fellowship, under which his gross egoism lay concealed that it might be more securely mischievous when it went loose. His amiability was an imposture, a dangerous harlequinade;

the man was bad. It was a plausible scoundrel, a vulgar profligate with a handsome face and a few cheap talents—had he not been reduced to stealing the picture of his friend?—whom these two women had loved, to whom one of them was married. Ah, the sting of it lay there! Good or bad, he was Eve's husband, and she was his wife, bound to him until the end. And then, for the first time, seeing her there, helpless and terrified, in her forlorn prettiness, he deceived himself no longer, wrapped up his tenderness for the woman, his angry pity for her misery that was coming, in no false terms. Such self-deception, honest as it had been, was no longer possible. He knew now that he loved her, and all that his love had been—the very salt and savour of life to him, the one delicious and adorable pain relieving the gray *ennui* of the rest of it, to remain with him always (even, as it seemed now, in the very article of death) as a reminder of the intolerable sweetness

which life, under other conditions, might have contained. And inexplicably, in the midst of his desolation, his heart sang a sort of fierce pæan : as a woman, delivered of a man-child, goes triumphing to meet the sordidness of death, so was there in Rainham's rapid acceptance of his fruitless and ineffectual love a distinct sense of victory, in which pain expired—victory over the meanness and triviality of modern life, which could never seem quite mean and trivial again, since he had proved it to be capable of such moments ; had looked once — and could so sing his 'Nunc Dimittis'—upon the face of love. And it all happened in a second, and in a further second—for his thought, quickened by the emergency, still leapt forward with incredible swiftness—a great audacity seized Philip Rainham, to save the beloved woman pain. The devil would be at him later, would beset him, harass him, madden him with hint and opportunity of profiting by Lightmark's forfeiture. But the devil's

turn was not yet : he was filled only with his great and reverent love, his sublime pity for the little tragical figure in front of him, whose house of painted cards was tumbling. Well ! he might save it for her for a little longer—at least, there was one desperate chance which he would try.

He had lived too long, unconsciously, in the habit of seeking her happiness, that it should fail him now in her evil hour, in the first flush of his new consciousness (ah, yes, there was beauty in that, and victory !), for any base personal thought or animosity against the man. He would have given her so easily his life ; should he grudge her his reputation ? The reputation of a man with one foot in the grave—what did it matter ? And it all came about in a few seconds.

Before any one of that strange company had found time to speak, Rainham had grasped the situation, knew himself at last and the others, and was prepared, scarcely counting the cost, with his

splendid lie. He made a step forward, then stopped suddenly, as if he were bracing himself for a moral conflict. His face was very white and rigid, his mouth set firmly; and the other three watched him with a strange expectancy depicted on all their countenances, amidst the various emotions proper to each of them; for he alone had the air of being master of the situation. And his resolve had need to be very keen, for just then Eve did a thing which might have wrecked it. She rose and came straight towards him; her pretty, distressed face was raised to his, still, in spite of its womanly anguish, with some of the pleading of a frightened child, who runs instinctively in its extremity to the person whom it knows best; and she gave him her two little trembling hands, which he held for a moment silently.

‘Philip,’ she said, in a low, constrained voice—‘Philip, I have known you all my life—longer than anyone. You were always good to me. Tell me whether it’s

true or not what this woman has told me. Philip, I shall die if this be true !

He bent his head for a moment. He had a wild longing to give up, simply to clasp her in his arms and console her with kisses and incoherent words of tenderness, as he had done years ago, when she was a very small child, and ran to him with her tear-stained cheeks, after a difficulty with her governess. But he only put her away from him very quietly and sadly.

‘It is not true,’ he said quietly, ‘if it is anything against your husband.’

The girl on the sofa, Kitty Crichton, rose ; she made a step forward irresolutely, seemed on the point of speaking, but something in Rainham’s eyes coerced her, and Eve was crying. He continued very fast and low, as though he told with difficulty some shameful story, learnt by rote.

‘I tell you it is not true. Lightmark,’ he added sternly, ‘there has been a mistake—you see that—for which I apologize.

Wake up, for God's sake! Come and see after your wife; some slander has upset her. This woman is—mine; I will take her away.'

The girl trembled violently; she appeared fascinated, terrified into a passive obedience by Rainham's imperious eyes, which burnt in his white face like the eyes of a dying man. She followed, half unconsciously, his beckoning hand. But Eve confronted her before she reached the door.

'Who am I to believe?' she cried scornfully. 'Why did you say it? What was the good of it—a lie like that? It is a lie, I suppose?'

'Yes, yes!' said the girl hysterically, 'it seems so. Oh, let me go, madam! I'm sorry I told you. I'll trouble nobody much longer. Call it a lie.'

She threw out her hands helplessly; she would have fallen, but Rainham caught her wrist and drew her towards him, supporting her with an arm.

‘Come,’ he said firmly, ‘this is no place for us.’

Eve regarded them all strangely, vaguely, the terror gradually dying out of her eyes—Lightmark expressionless and silent, as he had been all through the interview; the woman trembling on Rainham’s arm, who stood beside her with his downcast eyes, the picture of conscious guilt. A curious anguish too pale to be indignation plucked at her heart-strings—anguish in which, unaccountably, the false charge against her husband was scarcely considered; that had become altogether remote and unreal, something barely historical, fading already away in the dim shadows of the past. What hurt her, with a dull pain which she could not analyze, was the sudden tarnishing of a scarcely-admitted ideal by Rainham’s deliberate confession, making life appear for the moment intolerably sordid and mean. Would she have owned to herself that, with an

almost unconscious instinct, she had judged these two men all along by a different standard? Hardly. She loved her husband, and her marriage had not yet dissipated the memory of those golden days of illusion preceding it, in which her love had been of a finer kind. Only that time, in which it would have been impossible for her to judge him, in which he could only do right in her eyes, was gone. Occasions had arrived when they had inevitably to differ, on which the girl had gently acquiesced—if not without a touch of scorn—in his action, but had not felt obliged to accept his point of view. There had been times when her pride had suffered—for underneath her childish exterior, her air of being just a dainty little figure of Watteau, she had a very sensitive and delicate pride of her own—and then, if she had succeeded in forgiving Light-mark, it had not been without an effort which had made it difficult for her to

pardon herself. Sometimes, though she would scarcely have confessed it, her husband's mere approbateness had almost shocked her. It was good, no doubt, to be popular, harmless even to care for popularity—at least, one's traditions declared nothing to the contrary; but to care so exorbitantly as Lightmark appeared to do, to sacrifice so much to one's enthusiasm for pleasing inferior people—people whom, behind their backs, one was quite ready to tear to pieces, allowing them neither intelligence nor virtue—in just that there seemed to her some flaw of taste that was almost like a confession of failure. Surely she loved him, and was ready to forgive him much: not for worlds would she have confessed to disillusion. And yet, now and again, when the rush and ostentation of their new life, with its monotony of dinners and dances—so little like that which she had anticipated as the future lot of a painter's wife—had left her rather weary, a trifle sad, she had

thought suddenly of her old friend Philip Rainham, and the thought had solaced her. There is a sort of pleasure, even when one is married to the most amiable of husbands, and is getting quite old—very nearly twenty—in turning from time to time to a person who has known one in the very shortest of frocks, and whose intimate connection with chocolates and ‘treats’ is among one’s earliest traditions. She made no contrasts; and yet when occasionally on one of those afternoons—there seemed to be so many of them—when she was ‘at home,’ when her bright, large drawing-room was fullest, and she was distracted to find herself confusing, amidst the clatter of teacups, dear Mrs. Henderson, who painted wild-flowers so cleverly, with dear Lady Lorimer, who was going on the stage, she looked up and saw Rainham hovering in the near distance, or sitting with his teacup balanced in one long white hand as he turned a politely tolerant ear to the small

talk of a neighbour, she felt strangely rested. Trouble or confusion might come, she told herself, and how suddenly all these charming people, who were so surprisingly alike, and whose names were so exasperatingly different, would disappear. Dear Mrs. Henderson and dear Lady Lorimer, and that odious Mrs. Dollond—what was she saying to Dick now which had to be spoken with an air of such exaggerated intimacy, in so discreet an undertone?—how swiftly they would all be gone, like the snows of last year! Only Philip Rainham, she was sure, would be there still, a little older, perhaps, with the air of being a little more tired of things, but inwardly the same, unalterably loyal and certain. The prospect was curiously sustaining, the more in that she had no tangible cause of uneasiness, was an extremely happy woman—it was so that she would have most frequently described herself—only growing at times a little weary of the fashion-

able treadmill and the daily routine of not particularly noble interests which it involved. Catching his eyes sometimes, as he sat there, looking out idly, indifferently, upon it all—this success which was the breath of life to Dick—she found him somewhat admirable; disdainful, fastidious, reserved—beneath his surface good-humour, his constant kindness, he could scarcely be a happy man. In flashes of sudden gratitude, she would have been glad often to have done something for him, had there been anything in the world to do. And then she laughed at herself for such a vain imagination. Had it not been his proper charm all along that he was a man for whom one could do nothing? precisely because he wanted nothing, was so genuinely indifferent to anything that life could offer? And now all that was at an end; by his own confession he had finished it, admitting himself, with a frankness almost brutal, a man like other men, only with passions

more sordid, and a temper more unscrupulous, in that he had ruined this wretched woman, whose coming there had left a trail of vileness over her own life.

‘Ah, yes, go!’ she said, after awhile, answering Rainham’s exclamation. ‘For pity’s sake, go!’

Rainham bowed his head and obeyed her; as the door closed behind them, he could hear that she cried softly, and that Lightmark, his silence at last broken, consoled her with inaudible words.

CHAPTER XXIV.

RAINHAM turned at random out of Grove Road, walking aimlessly, and very fast, without considering direction. He had passed the girl's arm through his own as they left the house; and in a sort of stupefied obedience she had submitted. To her, too, one way was the same as another, as dreary and as vain. With Rainham, indeed, after the tension of the last few minutes, into which he had crowded such a wealth of suffering and of illumination, a curious stupor had succeeded. For the moment he neither thought nor suffered: simply, it was good to be out there, in the darkness—the darkness of London—after that immense

plunge, which was still too near him that he should attempt to appreciate it in all its relations. By-and-bye would be the season of reckoning, the just and delicate analysis, by a nicely critical nature, of all that he had deliberately lost, when he might run desperately before the whips of his own thought; now he felt only the lethargy which succeeds strenuous action, that has been, in a measure, victorious; the physical well-being of walking rapidly, vaguely, through the comfortable shadows, allowing the cold rain to pelt refreshingly upon his face and aching temples. And it was not until they had gone so through several streets, whose names were a blank to him, that Rainham bethought him, with a touch of self-reproach, of his companion, and how ill her thin garments and slender figure were calculated to suffer the down-pour, which he only found consoling. He drew her into the shelter of a doorway, signalled to a passing cab; and just then,

the light of an adjacent street-lamp falling upon her face, he realized for the first time in its sunken outline the progress of her malady.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said gently; ‘I did not understand that you were ill. You must tell me where you are lodging, and I will take you back.’ Then, as though he anticipated her hesitation, a tribute to her old ambiguity, become so useless, he added dryly: ‘You can tell me your address; you have no reason to hide yourself now.’

She glanced up at him furtively, shrinking back a little as though she feared his irony.

‘I live in Charlotte Street, No. — But pray let me go alone, sir! It will not be your way.’

‘I have rooms in Bloomsbury,’ he answered. ‘It will be entirely on my way.’

And the girl made no further protest when he handed her into the cab, an

inconvenient four-wheeler which had responded to his signal, and, after giving the driver the address which she had indicated, took his place silently beside her. Perhaps something of Rainham's own lethargy had infected her, after a scene so feverish ; or perhaps she could not but feel dimly, and in a manner not to be analyzed, how that, distant and apart as they two seemed, yet within the last hour, by Rainham's action, between her life and his a subtle, invisible chord had been stretched, so that the order of her going might well rest with him.

She cast furtive glances at him from time to time as he sat back, obscure in his corner, gazing out with eyes which saw nothing at the blurred gas-lamps, and the red flashes of the more rapid vehicles which outstripped them. And now that the first stupefying effect of his intervention was wearing away—it seemed like a mad scene in a theatre, or some monstrous dream, so surprising and unreal — her primitive consciousness awoke, and set her

wondering, inquiring, with bewilderment that was akin to terror, into the motives and bearing of their joint conduct. It had seemed to her natural enough then, as do the most grotesque of our sleeping visions when they are passing ; but now that she was awake, relieved from the coercion of his eyes, she was roundly amazed at her own complicity in so stupendous a fiction. What had he made her do ? Why had he taken this sin of another's on his own shoulders ? Eve's piteous cry of ' Philip ! ' at his entry recurred to her—the intimate nature of her appeal. The scent was promising ; but it opened out vistas of a loyalty too fantastic and generous to be true. Her mature cynicism of a girl of the people, disillusioned and abused, flouted the idea. Did she not know ' gentlemen ' and the nature of their love ? The girl was hardened by ill-usage, bitter from long brooding over her shame. She was glad when he turned to her at last, breaking a silence which the sullen roar of London

outside and beyond them, and the dreary rattling of the cab, seemed only to heighten, with a sudden gesture of despair.

‘If I had only known! If you had only told me two years ago!’

The suppressed passion in his voice, his air, terrified the girl. She bent forward trembling.

‘Ah! what have I done, what have I done?’ she moaned. ‘How did I know that it would all come like this? I meant no harm, sir. He persuaded me to deceive you after I had found out who he really was, to put you off the scent, keeping his name a secret. He said he had a right to ask that. He told me he was married, though he wasn’t then. And afterwards he made me move, when you were abroad: he wanted my address not to be known. That was the condition he made of his seeing after the child; he swore he would provide for her then, and bring her up like a lady. And he sent me the money for a bit pretty regular. Oh, it

was only for her sake, I promise you that! I wouldn't have touched a brass farthing for myself. But, after all, she *was* his child. And then, somehow or other, the money didn't come. He went away—he was away all the summer — and he said he had so many calls on him, such expenses.'

'Ah, the scoundrel!' cried Rainham, between his set teeth.

The girl took him up, hardly with an echo of his own resentment, rather with a sort of crushed directness, as one who acknowledged a bare fact, making no comment, merely admitting the obscure dreariness of things.

'Yes; he was a scoundrel. He was bad all along. I think he has no heart. And he has made me bad too. I was a good enough girl of old, before I knew him. Only something came over me to-night when I found *her* there, with that big house and the servants, and all that luxury, and thought how he couldn't spare

a few pounds to bring his own child up decent. Oh, I was vile to-night! I frightened her. Perhaps it was best as it happened. It dazed her. She'll remember less. She'll only remember your part of it, sir.'

She glanced across at him with timid eyes, which asked him to be so good as to explain: all that had confused her so.

'I don't understand,' she murmured helplessly—'I don't understand.'

He ignored the interrogation in her eyes with a little gesture, half irritable and half entreating, which coerced her.

'How did you come there?' he asked. 'What was the good——'

His question languished suddenly, and he let both hands fall slowly upon his knees. In effect, the uselessness of all argument, the futility of any recrimination in the face of what had been accomplished, was suddenly borne in upon him with irresistible force; and his momentary irritation against the malice of circumstance,

the baseness of the man, was swallowed up in a rising lassitude which simply gave up.

The girl continued after awhile, in a low, rapid voice, her eyes fixed intently upon the opal in an antique ring which shone faintly upon one of Rainham's quiet hands, as though its steady radiance helped her speech :

‘ It was all an accident—an accident. I was sick and tired of waiting and writing, and getting never a word in reply. My health went, too, last winter, and ever since I have been getting weaker and worse. I knew what that meant : my mother died of a decline—yes, she is dead, thank God ! this ten years—and it was then, when I knew I wouldn't get any better, and there was the child to think of, that I wanted to see him once more. There was a gentleman, too, who came——’

She broke off for a moment, clasping her thin hands together, which trembled as though the memory of some past, fantastic terror had recurred.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she went on presently. ‘He frightened me, that was all. He had such a stern, smooth-spoken way with him; and he seemed to know so much. He said that he had heard of me and my story, and would befriend me if I would tell him the name of the man who ruined me. Yes, he would befriend me—help me to lead a respectable life.’

Her sunken eyes flashed for a moment, and her lip was scornfully curled.

‘God knows!’ she cried, with a certain rude dignity, ‘I was always an honest woman but for Cyril—Dick, she called him.’

The intimate term, tossed so lightly from those lips, caused Rainham to quiver, as though she had rasped raw wounds. It was the concrete touch giving flesh and blood to his vision of her past. It made the girl’s old relation with Eve’s husband grow into a very present horror, startlingly real and distinct.

‘Go on,’ he said at last wearily.

‘ Ah, I didn’t tell him, sir,’ she explained, misinterpreting his silence. ‘ I wouldn’t have done that. He sore angered me, though he may have meant well. He was set on seeing the child then, but I wouldn’t let him. It came over me after he was gone that that, maybe, was what he came for—the child. Someone might have put him on to take her from me—some society. Oh, I was at my wits’ end, sir! for, you see, she is all I have—all—all! Then I made up my mind to go and see him. Bad as he is, he wouldn’t have let them do it. Oh, I would have begged and prayed to him on my knees for that.’

She stopped for a moment, hectic and panting. She pressed both hands against her breast, as though she sought composure. Then she continued :

‘ It was all a mistake, you know, my being shown in there to-night! I would never have sought her out myself, being where she is. Oh, I have my pride! It was the servant’s mistake : he took me for

a fitter, no doubt, from one of the big dressmakers'. Perhaps there was one expected; I don't know. But I didn't think of that when I came in and found her sitting there, so proud and soft. It all came over me—how badly he had used me, and little Meg there at home, and hard Death coming on me—and I told her. It seemed quite natural then, as though I had come for that, just for that and nothing else, though, Heaven knows, it was never in my mind before. I was sorry afterwards. Yes, before you came in with *him* I was sorry. It wasn't as if I owed her any grudge. How could she have known? She is an innocent young thing, after all—younger than I ever was—for all her fine dresses and her grand-ladyish way. It was like striking a bit of a child. . . . God forgive him,' she added half hysterically, 'if he uses her as bad as me!'

Rainham's hand stole to his side, and for a moment he averted his head. When he turned to her again she was uncertain

whether it was more than a pang of sharp physical pain, such as she well knew herself, which had so suddenly blanched his lips.

‘For pity’s sake, girl,’ he whispered, ‘be silent.’

She considered him for a moment silently in the elusive light, that matched the mental twilight in which she viewed his mood. His expression puzzled, evaded her; and she could not have explained the pity which he aroused.

‘I am sorry,’ she broke out again, moved by an impulse which she did not comprehend. ‘You did it for her.’

‘Oh, for her! What does it matter since it is done? Say that it was an accident—a folly—that I am sorry too.’

‘No,’ said the girl softly; ‘you are glad.’

He shrugged his shoulders with increasing weariness, an immense desire to have the subject ended and put away with forgotten things.

‘I am glad, then. Have it as you like.’

But she resumed with a pertinacity which his irritated nerves found malignant.

‘If it was that,’ she said ambiguously, ‘you had better have held your tongue. You had only to gain—— Ah, why did you do it? What was the good?’

He made another gesture of lassitude; then, rousing himself, he remarked :

‘It was a calculation, then, a piece of simple arithmetic. If it gives her a little peace a little longer, why should three persons suffer—be sacrificed—when two might serve?’

‘Oh, him!’ cried the girl scornfully; ‘he can’t suffer—he hasn’t a heart!’

Rainham looked up at her at last. His fingers ceased playing with his ring.

‘Oh, let me count for a little,’ he murmured, with a little ghastly laugh.

The girl’s eyes looked full into his, and in a moment they shone out of her face,

which was suffused with a rosy flush that made her almost beautiful, with the illumination of some transcendent idea.

‘ Ah, you *are* a gentleman !’ she cried.

In the tension of their nerves they were neither aware that the cab had come to a standstill, and before he could prevent her, she had stooped swiftly down and caught his hand passionately to her lips.

‘ Heaven forgive me ! How unhappy you must be !’ she said.

CHAPTER XXV.

AFTER all, things were not so complicated as they seemed. For Kitty was nearly at the end of her troubles; her trivial little life, with its commonplace tale of careless wrong and short-lived irony of suffering, telling with the more effect on a nature at once so light and so wanting in buoyancy, was soon to be hurried away and forgotten, amid the chaos of things broken and ruined.

‘I don’t want to die,’ she said, day after day, to the sternly cheerful nurse who had her in charge at the quiet, sunny hospital in the suburbs where Rainham had gained admission for her as in-patient. ‘But I don’t know that I want to live, either.’

And so it had been from the beginning, poor soul, poor wavering fatalist! with a nature too innately weak to make an inception either of good or evil, the predestined prey of circumstance.

As she lay in the long white room dedicated to those stricken, like herself, with the disease that feeds on youth, her strength ebbing away quite painlessly, she often entered upon the pathless little track of introspection, a pathetic, illogical summing up of the conduct of her life, which always led so quickly to the same broad end of reassurance, followed by unreasoned condemnation—the conventional judgment on her very inability to discover where she had so gravely sinned, how and when she had earned the extreme penalty of reprobation and of death. She was too wicked, she concluded hopelessly, vaguely struggling with the memories of the teaching of her Sunday-school, too wicked to find out wherein her exceeding wickedness lay.

One comfort she took to her sad heart, that Rainham had not condemned her ; that he had only pitied her, while he reserved his damnation for the iron-bound, Sabbatarian world which had ruined and spurned another helpless victim. Rainham she believed implicitly, obeyed unquestioningly, with a sense of gratitude which had been largely mingled with self-reproach, until he had told her that, so far as he was concerned, she had nothing to reproach herself with. It never occurred to her for a moment now to question or to resent the part he had made her play on that tragical afternoon in Grove Road. Why should she? The imputation of a lie, what was that to her? Had he not taken it all, all her misery upon himself? Had he not fed, and clothed, and lodged her like the most penitent of prodigals, although she had no claim upon him until he chose to give it to her? Her benefactor could do no wrong, that was her creed ; and it made

things wonderfully smooth, the future on a sudden strangely simple. She had lied to him at the bidding of the other, and he had not resented it when he came to know the truth: she had brought shame on him, and he had not reproached her. A man like this was outside her experience; she regarded him with a kind of grateful amazement—a wondering veneration, which sometimes held her dumb in his presence.

If she had felt unhappy at first about the future of her child—and there had been moments when this thought had been more bitter than all the rest of her life together—this care was taken from her when Rainham promised to adopt the little girl, or, better still, to induce Mrs. Bullen to open her motherly heart to her. ‘They’ll be only too glad to get her,’ he had said decisively, interrupting her awkward little speech of thanks. ‘That will be all right. Mrs. Bullen hasn’t known what to do with herself since her

son went to sea ; she wants a child to care for. You needn't worry yourself about that.'

It was after this that Kitty had owned to the nurse that she had no desire to live ; and though the shifting of this burden enabled her to carry her life for a time less wearily, the end was not far ; and the news of her death came to Rainham just after the first snow-fall, in the middle of a dreary, cruel December.

The winter wore on, and still Rainham was to be seen almost nightly in his now familiar corner by the fireside at Brodonowski's, in the seat next that which had become Oswyn's by right of almost immemorial occupation. His negotiations with the company who were to buy him out of his ancestral dock were still incomplete, and now he felt a strange reluctance to hurry matters, to hasten the day on which he should be forced to leave the little room looking out upon the unprofitable river which he loved.

The two men would sit together, sometimes talking, but far more often not, until a very late hour; and when the doors were closed upon them they often wandered aimlessly in the empty streets, dismissing their cares in contemplation of great moonlit buildings, or the strong, silent river, sliding under the solemn bridges; united from day to day more closely by the rare sympathy which asks no questions and finds its chief expression in silence. One thing they both hated, to be alone; but loneliness for them was not what most mortals understand by the name. There was company for them in inanimate things—in books, in pictures, and even in objects less expressive; they were men who did not fear their thoughts, who looked to the past for their greatest pleasures. And now for Rainham the whole of life was a thing so essentially weary and flavourless that the *ennui* of little things seemed hardly worth consideration. He was dumbly content to

let destiny lead him whither it would, without apprehension, without expectation. Oswyn had asked him, one evening, just before they parted on the doorstep of the club, with a certain abruptness which the other had long since learnt to understand, why he was in London instead of being at Bordighera? Rainham sighed, echoing the question as if the idea suggested was entirely novel.

‘Why, because—— Well, for one thing, because you are in London and the Dollonds are at Bordighera. You don’t know Mrs. Dollond?’ he added, seeing that the other looked at him with a certain air of wistful distrust, a momentarily visible desire to see behind so obvious a veil.

‘No, thank God!’ said Oswyn devoutly, shrugging his bent shoulders, and turning away with a relapse into his unwonted impassiveness.

‘But you have apparently heard of her,’ continued Rainham, with an effort towards humour. ‘And I am afraid people have

been slandering her. She is a very excellent person, the soul of good-nature, and as amusing as—as an American comic paper! But in my present state of health I'm afraid she would be a little too much for me. I can stand her in homœopathic doses, but the Riviera isn't nearly big enough for the two of us as permanencies. No, I think I shall wait until next winter now.'

Oswyn shot a quick glance at him, and then looked away as suddenly, and, after a brief silence, they parted.

Rainham was already beginning to consider himself secure from the inconvenient allusions to Lightmark and their altered relations which he had at first nervously anticipated. Oswyn rarely mentioned the other painter's name, and accepted, without surprise or the faintest appearance of a desire for explanation, the self-evident fact of the breach between the two quondam allies; regarding it as in the natural course of events, and as an additional link in the

chain of their intimacy. Indeed, Lightmark had long ceased to be a component element of the atmosphere of Brodowski's : he no longer brought the sunshine of his expansive, elaborate presence into the limits of the dingy little place ; nor did its clever, shabby constituents, with their bright-eyed contempt for the popular slaves of a fatuous public, care to swell the successful throng who worshipped the rising genius in his new temple in Grove Road. The fact that in those days Rainham avoided Lightmark's name, once so often quoted ; his demeanour when the more ignorant or less tactful of their mutual acquaintances pressed him with inquiries as to the well-being and work of his former friend, had not failed to suggest to the intimate circle that there had been a rupture, a change, something far more significant than the general severance which had gradually been effected between them, the unreclaimed children of the desert, and Richard Lightmark, the brilliant society

painter ; something as to which it seemed that explanation would not be forthcoming, as to which questions were undesirable. The perception of this did not demand much subtlety, and, in accordance with the instincts of their craft, Rainham's reticence was respected.

'It was curious when you come to think of it,' Copal said reflectively one evening after his return from a late autumnal ramble in Finistère, and while the situation was still new to him, 'very curious. Rainham and Lightmark were inseparable ; so were Rainham and Oswyn. And all the time Lightmark and Oswyn were about as friendly as the toad and the harrow. Sounds like Euclid, doesn't it? Things equal to the same thing, and quite unequal to one another.'

'Yes,' assented McAllister, thoughtfully stroking his reddish beard. 'And there was a time—not so very long ago, either—when Lightmark and Oswyn were on pretty good terms too !'

‘ Ah, well ; most people quarrel with old Oswyn sooner or later. But it certainly does look a little as if—as if Lightmark had done something and the other two had found it out—Oswyn first. However, it’s no business of ours. I suppose he’s safe to be elected next week, though he isn’t a Scotchman—eh, Sandy, old man ?’

‘ Quite,’ said the other laconically.

And then their conversation was modulated into a less personal key as they resumed their discussion of the colony of American *pleinairistes* with whom Rathbone had foregathered at Pontaven, and of the ‘ paintability ’ of fields of *sarrasin* and poplars.

Rainham found it rather difficult to satisfy his inner self as to his real, fundamental motive for wintering in England. Sir Egbert’s orders ? They had not after all amounted to much more than an expression of opinion, and it was somewhat late for him to begin to obey his doctors. The transfer of his business ? That could have

been carried out just as well in his absence by his solicitors.

For some time after Kitty's death—and her illness had certainly at first detained him—he was able to assure himself that he was waiting until little Margot (so he called the child) should have secured a firm foothold in the affections of his foreman's family; the fact that the Bullens were so soon to leave him seemed to render this all the more necessary. But now, in the face of Bullen's somewhat deferential devotion and his wife's vociferous raptures, there hardly seemed to be room for doubt on this score. For the present, at least, the child ran no risk greater than that of being too much petted.

And at last he was obliged to own that his inability to follow his established precedent was due to some moral deficiency, a species of cowardice which he could only vaguely analyze, but which was closely connected with his reluctance to isolate

himself among the loquacious herd of those who sought for health or pleasure. If Oswyn would have accompanied him to the Riviera he would have gone; but Oswyn was not to be induced to forsake his beloved city, and so he stayed, telling himself that each week was to be the last.

On a bright day, when spring seemed to be within measurable distance in spite of the cold, he made an expedition with Margot to Kensington Gardens; and they passed, on their way through the Park, the seat on which he had rested after his interview with Lady Garnett on that far-away October evening—the memory struck him now as of another life. It was frosty to-day, and the seat raised itself forlornly from quite a mound of snow. And when they left the Gardens he hailed a cab, and, before they had reached the Circus on their homeward journey, bade the man turn and drive northward, up Orchard Street and into Grove Road.

It was dusk now, and there were bright touches of light in the windows of the low white house, which he glanced at almost surreptitiously as they passed, and two carriages waited before the outer door.

‘My dear child,’ he remarked suddenly to the little girl, who was growing almost frightened by his frowning silence, ‘you should always, always remember that when a man has made a fool of himself, the best thing he can do is to clear out, and not return to his folly like the proverbial dog!’

Margot looked solemnly puzzled for a moment, and then laughed, deciding boldly that this was a new and elaborate game—a joke, perhaps—which she was too little to understand, but which politeness and good-fellowship alike required her at least to appear to appreciate. They were great friends already, these two. Children always recognised an ally in the man who made so few friends among his peers, and for

children—especially for pretty children of a prettiness which accorded with his own private views—Rainham had an undeniable weakness.

On slack days—and they were always slack now—loungers about the precincts of the dock often caught a glimpse of the child's fair hair above the low level of the dark bow-window which leaned outwards from Rainham's room; and the foreman had even gone so far as to suggest that his master was bringing her up to the business. 'Pays us for looking after her, he confided to his wife, 'and looks after her himself!'

Mrs. Bullen laughed and then sighed, being a soft-hearted woman, and inclined to grieve over their impending desertion of their unbusinesslike master.

'Mr. Philip couldn't do more for her if he was her own father,' she acknowledged appreciatively.

Whereat Bullen had smiled with the superior air of one who knew—of one

who had been down to the sea in ships, and was versed in the mysteries of the great world, of fathers and of children.

‘Right you are, old woman,’ he chuckled, ‘no more he could. Blessed if he could! And there’s no mistake about that. And when you and me go North in the spring, why, it strikes me that we shall have to leave missie behind. Yes, that we shall: though I’d take her, glad enough, without the money.’

If at first his association with Margot reminded Rainham of another little girl whom he had loved, and whose place she could never even approximately fill, the memory was not a bitter one, and he was soon able to listen to her childish questioning without more than a gentle pang. In time, he even found a dreary transient pleasure in closing his eyes on the dank, dun reality of Blackpool, while the child discoursed to her doll in the nook of the bow-window, and his fancy wandered in another sunnier, larger room,

with open windows, and the hum of a softer language rising in frequent snatches from the steep street outside; with a faint perfume of wood fires in the balmy, shimmering air, a merry clatter and jingle of hoofs, and bells, and harness; and another daintier child voice ringing quaint colloquial Italian in his ears. The awakening was certainly cruel, sometimes with almost the shock of a sudden savage blow, but the dream lasted and recurred: he had always been a dreamer, and every day found him more forgetful of the present, more familiar with the past.

Upon his return, rather late, to the dock, he recognised, with a thrill of pleasure tinged with something of self-reproach, among the little pile of business letters which Mrs. Bullen brought to him with his tea-tray, the delicate angular handwriting of Lady Garnett, and he made haste to possess himself of the secret of the narrow envelope, of a by-gone fashion, secured with a careful seal.

‘ MY DEAR ’ (so she wrote),

‘ This is very absurd ; yes, at the risk of offending you, I must tell you that it is not clever of you to take things so very much *au sérieux*. I know more than you think, Philip. Mrs. Sylvester, who means well, doubtless—but, *mon Dieu*, what a woman!—Mrs. Sylvester has been here ; she has spoken to me, and I am afraid I have scandalized her. “ You don’t suppose he has married her,” I said, I confess not altogether disingenuously, and how mystified she looked ! You will say that Mrs. Sylvester ought to mind her own affairs, and you will even find me a trifle impertinent, perhaps. But I claim my privilege. Am I not your godmother ? Still, I am rather intrigued, I own. I don’t want to ask what you have done, or why ; whatever it is, I approve of it. What I find fault with is what you are doing, the part you are playing. You must not give me the chagrin of seeing Mrs. Sylvester and the

admirable Charles triumphant at your expense, Philip. You must show yourself: you must come and see me; you must come to dinner forthwith, or I shall have to make you a visit at your dock. I must talk to you, *mon cher!* I am troubled about you, and so is Mary. Come to us, and Mary shall play to you and exorcise your demons. Besides, I am bored—horribly bored. Yes, even Mary bores me sometimes, and I her, doubtless; and we want you. We will own that we are selfish, after all, but you must come!

Then there was a postscript: ‘Mary suggests that possibly you are not so incomprehensible as I think; perhaps you are at Bordighera? But you ought to let us know.’

Rainham sat with the letter before him until Margot came to bid him good-night. And then he decided to take advantage of the suggestion of the postscript: surely, if he did not answer the dear old lady’s letter, she would conclude that he was indeed upon his travels!

CHAPTER XXVI.

IF Eve could have mended her idol discreetly and permanently, so that for the outward world it would still present the same uncompromising surface, so that no inquisitive or bungling touch could bring to light the grim, disfiguring fracture which it had sustained, it is probable that she would have chosen this part, and hidden the grief of her life from the eyes of all save those who were so inseparably connected with the tragedy of that autumnal afternoon. But it was so completely shattered, the pieces were so many ; and, worst of all, some of them were lost. To forget! What a world of bitter irony was in the word! And she could not even bury her

illusions quietly and unobserved of uncharitable eyes ; there was the sordid necessity of explanation to be faced, the lame pretexts to be fashioned, and the half-truths to be uttered, which bore an interpretation so far more damning than the full measure which it seemed so hard to give.

Mrs. Sylvester, whose jealous maternal instincts continued to be on the alert hardly less keenly after her daughter's marriage than before, had soon detected something of oppression in the atmosphere ; an explanation had been demanded, and the story, magnified somewhat in its least attractive features by Eve's natural reticence, had gone to swell the volume of similar experiences recorded in Mrs. Sylvester's brain. That she felt a genuine sorrow for Rainham is certain, for the grain of her nature was kindly enough beneath its veneer of worldly cleverness ; but her grief was more than tempered by a sense of self-congratulation, of unlimited

approval of the prudence which had enabled her to marry her daughter so irreproachably before the bubble burst. Indeed, the little glow of pride which mingled quite harmoniously with her nevertheless perfectly sincere regret was an almost visible element in her moral atmosphere, as she emerged from the door of her daughter's house after this momentous interview, drawing her furs about her with a little shiver before she stepped into her well-appointed brougham. She had the air of saying to herself, 'Dear me, dear, dear! it's very sad, it's very terrible; but I! how clever I have been, and how beautifully I behaved!' There was nothing particularly novel from her point of view in the story which she had just extracted from her reluctant daughter; the situation called for an edifying, comfortable sorrow, but by no means for surprise. It was what might have been expected—though this (which was somewhat hard)-did not render the episode any the less reprehensible.

And it was this feeling which had predominated during the lady's homeward drive, and the half hour's *tête-à-tête* before dinner, which she had utilized for an exchange of confidences with her son.

'I didn't know that there had been an—
an exposure,' he said, as he stood, a stiff, uncompromising figure, before the fire in the little drawing-room. 'But I had an idea that it was inevitable from—from certain information which I have received. In fact, I have been rather puzzled. You must do me the justice to remember that I never liked the man—though he had his good points,' he added a little awkwardly, as inconvenient memories of the many kindnesses which he had received at Rainham's hands thrust themselves upon him. 'But I'm afraid he's hardly the sort of person one ought to be intimate with. Especially you, and Eve. Of course, for her it's out of the question.'

'Oh, of course,' said Mrs. Sylvester decisively; 'and they haven't seen him

since, I need hardly say. In fact, they haven't even heard of him. They haven't told a soul except me, and of course I shan't tell anybody,' the lady concluded with a sigh, as she remembered how difficult she had found it to drive straight home without breaking the vow of secrecy which her daughter had exacted from her.

Whatever Mrs. Sylvester may have thought, it is certain that the interview, from which she enjoyed the impression of having emerged so triumphantly, had brought anything but consolation to her daughter, whose first impulse was to blame herself quite angrily for having admitted to her secret places after all so natural a confidante.

Nor had Eve repented of this feeling. As time went on she found her mother's somewhat too obviously complacent attitude more and more exasperating, and she compared her want of reserve very unfavourably with her husband's demeanour

(it must be owned that he had his reasons for a certain reticence). Against Colonel Lightmark, also, she cherished something of resentment, for he, too, more especially in collaboration with her mother, was wont to indulge in elderly moral reflections, which, although for the most part no names were mentioned, were evidently not directed generally and at hazard against the society of which the Colonel and Mrs. Sylvester formed ornaments so distinguished.

Upon one afternoon, when Christmas was already a thing of the past, and the days were growing longer, it was with considerable relief that Eve heard the outer door close upon her mother, leaving her alone in the twilight of the smaller portion of the double drawing-room. She was alone, for Mrs. Sylvester had been the last to depart of a small crowd of afternoon callers, and Dick was interviewing somebody—a frame-maker, a model, or a dealer—in the studio. She sat with a book un-

opened in her hand, gazing intently into the fire, which cast responsive flickers over her face, giving a shadowed emphasis to the faint line which had begun to display itself, not unattractively, between her eyebrows and the irregular curve of her brown hair. She was growing very weary of it all, the distraction which she had sought, the forgetfulness of self which she had hoped to achieve, by living perpetually in a crowd. Indeed, to such a point had she carried her endeavours, that Mrs. Lightmark's beauty was already becoming a matter of almost public interest. She was a person to be recognised and recorded by sharp-eyed journalists at the playhouses on 'first nights'; her carriage-horses performed extensive nightly pilgrimages in the regions of Kensington and Mayfair; and she had made a reputation for her dressmaker. And already she realized that her efforts to live outside herself were futile; moments like these must come, and the knowledge that, in spite of her count-

less friends and voluminous visiting-list, she was alone.

Her mother? Dick? After all, they were only in the position of occupying somewhat exceptionally prominent places on the visiting-list.

As for her husband, after all these long months of married life, she could not say that she knew him. She regarded him with a kind of admiration of his personal, social attractions, in which she recognised him as fully her equal, with a kind of envy of the genius, which she could not entirely comprehend, but which seemed to make him so vastly her superior. And yet there was a shadow of doubt about it all : there had been sinister flashes, illuminating, dimly enough, depths which the marital intimacy still left unfathomed, making her wonder whether her husband's candour might not mask something more terrible than forgotten follies, something that might prove a more real and irremovable barrier between them than even that in-

definable want of a mutual horizon, of common ground upon which their traditions could unite themselves.

So long as Dick had remained cheerfully masterful, and picturesquely *flamboyant*, without even an occasional betrayal of the bitterness which makes the one attribute savour of insolence, and the other of oppression, his wife had regarded him as exactly fulfilling the part for which he had obviously been cast—of a good-humoured, ornamental domestic tyrant, to be openly obeyed and covertly coerced. A husband who assisted her acquisition of social laurels; who gave her more money than she asked for; who designed for her the most elaborate and enviable dresses—yes, her mother certainly had reasons for declaring him a paragon! But still Eve was vaguely conscious of a defect, a shortcoming. It was all very well so far as it went, but the prospect was by no means unbounded. And, then, had he not also designed gowns for Mrs. Dollond, and

succeeded (there was a sting in this) where success was somewhat more difficult of achievement?

Now, moreover, he had begun to carry an aggrieved air—an air which suggested that he pitied himself, that he considered that he had been unfairly dealt with, that he was entitled to assume the attitude of an innocent, injured victim of some blindly-dealt retribution. What did that mean? The only explanation which his wife could find for this symptomatic manifestation had its origin in the unhappy episode of which the memory was always on the threshold of her solitary thoughts, and, perhaps, of his. She began to feel, with a certain compunction, that Dick must resent the circumstances which obliged him practically to sever his acquaintance with a man who had indisputably figured for so many years as his nearest friend; and she asked herself sometimes whether the circumstances in question did not, in effect, centre in herself.

Although the world was as yet far from being an open book for her, it was conceivable that Philip Rainham (even if one judged by appearances), had done nothing which need necessarily cast him beyond the pale of the unregenerate society of bachelordom. It never occurred to her that, so far as she herself was concerned, a renewal of the old relation was among possible things: if she had met Philip in public she would have made it clear to him that he was no longer on the same plane with her; that, from her point of view, he had practically ceased to exist.

It was only when she was alone, and pleasant, bitter memories of the old days recurred, that she owned to herself how hard it was to think of this intimacy as severed by a rule of moral conduct no less inexorable, and even more cruel, than death. And yet there were moments—and this was one of them—when her husband's bearing seemed more portentous, when the explanation she had found

possible seemed no longer probable, and uncomfortable doubts as to the real meaning of his uneasiness assailed her mind.

A fragment of burning coal fell with a clatter into the grate: she welcomed the interruption, and for the moment abandoned her thoughts, only, however, to enter upon them again by a different path.

‘I wonder why I don’t hate him?’ she asked herself, almost wistfully. (She was not now thinking of her husband.) ‘I ought to hate him, I suppose, and to pity her. But I pity him, I think, and I hate—her.’

The fire still crackled cheerfully, and she began to feel its heat oppressive; she let her hands fall with a gesture half of contempt, half of despair, and then rose abruptly, and walked into the darkness of the larger room, from the unshuttered windows of which she could see the dark bulk of her husband’s studio looming against the gray, smoke-coloured sky.

While she stood, leaning with something

of a forward tilt of her gracile figure upon the ledge of the low square window, the side door of the studio opened, letting a flood of light out upon the lawn, and with absent eyes she saw that her husband's visitor was taking his leave. Presently the door closed; the broad rays which had shone coldly from the skylight of the building died out, so abruptly that the change seemed almost audible; and simultaneously she heard her husband's careless step in the long glazed passage, half conservatory, half corridor, which led from her domain to his. He came in, softly humming an air from a comic opera, and then paused, peering into the darkness for an instant before he distinguished his wife's shape in dusky relief against the pale square of window.

'Don't light the room!' she said quickly, as she saw him stretch his hand towards the little button which controlled the electric light; 'we can talk in the dark.'

He stopped with his hand on the porce-

lain knob, breaking off his ditty in the middle of a bar.

‘By all means, if you like,’ he said, ‘though I should prefer to see you, you know.’

Then he dropped luxuriously into an easy-chair by the side of the fire, which continued to exhibit a comfortable, glowing redness.

But very soon Lightmark became aware of a certain weight of apprehension, which took from him the power to enjoy these material comforts; unattractive possibilities seemed to hover in the silent darkness, and his more subtile senses were roused, and brought to a state of quivering tension which was almost insupportable. His wife moved, and he felt that she had directed her eyes towards him, though he could not see her; and he winced instinctively, seeking to be first to break the silence, but unable to find a timely word to say. The blow fell, and even while she spoke he felt a quick admiration for the instinct

which had enabled him to anticipate her thought.

‘Dick,’ she said quietly, without moving from her place by the window, ‘have you seen *him* since——?’

There was no need of names; he did not even notice the omission. Could she see his face, he wondered, in the fire light?

‘No!’ he sighed, ‘no!’

She came nearer to him, so near that he could hear her breathing, the touch of her fingers upon the back of a chair; and presently she spoke again:

‘You think there was no excuse for him?’

‘Ah—for excuse! She was pretty, you know!’

He got up, and stood facing her for a moment in the darkness, and then, while she appeared to consider, glanced at his watch, and made a suggestion of movement towards the door.

‘Only a minute, Dick,’ she said, in the

same set voice. 'You will do me the justice to admit that I haven't alluded to this before. But I have been thinking—I can't help it—and I want to know——'

'To know?' he echoed impatiently.

'To know your position—our position; what you had to do with it all.'

'What is the good? What difference can it make?'

'It's the doubt,' she said—'the doubt! I thought you might like to explain.'

'To explain? Good Lord! what have I to explain? Is it not all settled, all clear? My dear child, let us be reasonable, let us forget; it's the only way.'

There was less of anger in his voice, but if Eve could have seen his eyes in the firelight, she might have noticed that they were very bright, and their pupils were contracted to hard, iridescent points.

'How can it be settled,' she asked wearily, 'while there is this shadow of doubt? And to forget—Heaven knows I have tried!'

Dick shrugged his shoulders tolerantly.

‘What do you want me to say?—to explain?’

‘Could you not have warned him, Dick? Did you not see it coming? She, that woman, was she not your model? Did he not meet her at your studio? Was not that the beginning of it all? Ah, can you say that you were not to blame?’

She spoke fast, following question with question, as if she anticipated the answer with mingled feelings of hope and fear, and there was more of entreaty than of denunciation in her last words.

‘It’s such an old story,’ he rejoined, with an air of feeble protest. ‘How could I foresee what would happen? And,’ he added, hardening himself, ‘they did not meet for the first time at my studio; on the contrary, it was he who brought her to me, and I suspected nothing. What more can I say? Surely it is all plain enough?’

Eve sighed. It seemed to her husband that she was on the whole disappointed, and he felt that, while he was about it, he might have given himself a freer hand, and made himself emerge, not only without a stain upon his character—the expression occurred to him with a kind of familiar mockery—but with beaten drums and flying colours.

He reflected that this was another example of the folly of attempting to economize. At the same time, he was gently thrilled by what he owned to himself was a not ignoble emotion: that sigh seemed to speak so naturally and pathetically of disillusionment, it was such a simple little confession of a damaged ideal. It did not occur to him to suspect that the character of which his wife had formed too proudly high an estimate was his own.

‘Don’t you think you might trust me?’ he said presently in a milder, almost paternal tone, magnanimously prepared

for a charming display of penitence, which it would be his duty rather to encourage than to deprecate.

‘To trust you?’ replied Eve quickly. ‘Haven’t I the appearance of trusting you? Don’t I accept your explanations?’

It was Lightmark’s turn to sigh. His wife moved away, with an air of dismissing the subject.

‘It is quite dark; it must be time to dress for dinner. Please turn on the light.’ Then she added as she left the room, without waiting for an answer: ‘And you, do you find it so easy to forget?’

When Lightmark was alone, he stood for a few minutes before the fire in meditation; then he clenched his fist viciously.

‘Confound the girl, and him, too! No, poor devil! he meant well. It was just the senseless, quixotic sort of thing one would have expected of him. But I don’t

know that it has done much good. It has made me feel a sneak, though I've only been lying to back him up. Why couldn't he let it alone? There would have been a storm, of course, but it would soon have blown over, and no one else need have known.'

He stopped in front of a mirror—he had been pacing up and down the room—and found himself looking rather pale in the soft, brilliant glow of the incandescent lamps. Moreover, the clock pointed to an hour very near that for which the carriage had been ordered.

While he was dressing for dinner, it occurred to him—it was not for the first time—that, after all, it would take very little to render Rainham's bungling devotion, and his own meritorious aberrations from the path of truth, worse than nugatory. For what if Kitty should split?—so he elegantly expressed his fears—what if the girl, of whom he had heard nothing since the day of that deplorable scene,

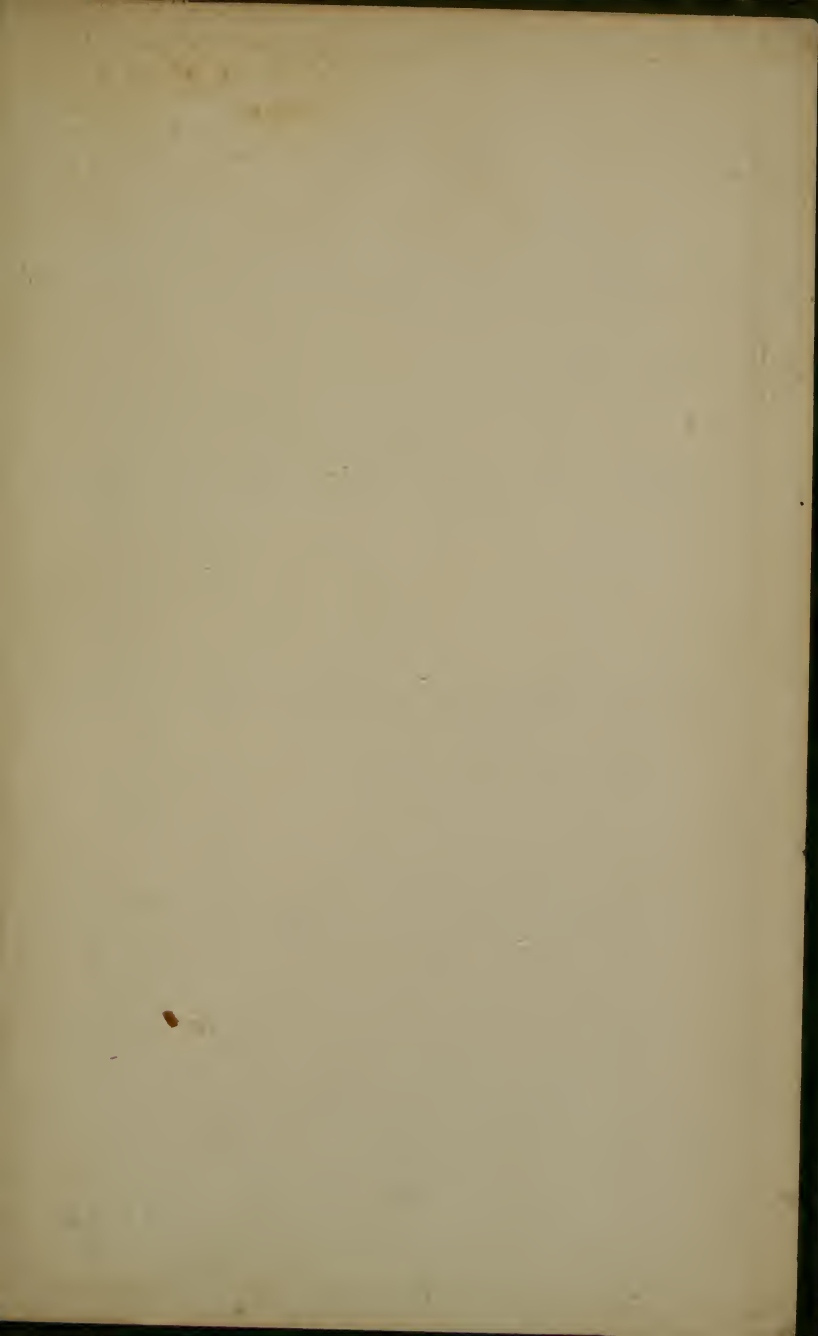
should break loose, and throw up the part which she had undertaken upon such very short notice ?

Decidedly, he felt that he was abundantly justified in resenting the false position into which he had been thrust ; the imposture was too glaring. Would it not even now be well to remodel the situation, with a greater semblance of adherence to facts ?—to make a clean breast of it ? The crudity of the idea offended him ; the process would necessarily be wanting in art. But possibly it was not yet too late to substitute a story which, if it caused him temporary discomfort, would at least leave him more certain of the future, the master of an easier, a less violently outraged conscience.

At dinner the taciturnity, bordering on moroseness, of a talker usually so brilliant led his host to surmise that Lightmark had ruined a picture, his hostess to conclude that he had quarrelled with his wife. He came home early, and occupied the

small hours of the morning in forming an amended plan of campaign, of which the first move took the shape of a somewhat voluminous letter, addressed to Philip Rainham.

END OF VOL. II.



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